

TRAVIS BAGWELL
**AWAKEN
ONLINE**
DOMINION



Awaken Online

Book 4: Dominion

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In writing this book, I realized that I have no idea how to flirt.

It's a wonder that my wife married me.

Contents

Foreword

Prologue

Chapter 1 - Veiled

Chapter 2 - Accused

Chapter 3 - Decimated

Chapter 4 - Weak

Chapter 5 - Strategic

Chapter 6 - Capitalistic

Chapter 7 - Optimistic

Chapter 8 - Persuasive

Chapter 9 - Durable

Chapter 10 - Feral

Chapter 11 - Malleable

Chapter 12 - Exhausted

Chapter 13 - Evolved

Chapter 14 - Anxious

Chapter 15 - Guilty

Chapter 16 - Overgrown

Chapter 17 - Determined

Chapter 18 - Hopeless

Chapter 19 - Victorious

Chapter 20 - Unholy

Chapter 21 - Floating

Chapter 22 - Complicated

Chapter 23 - Keen

Chapter 24 - Mercantile

Chapter 25 - Mechanized

Chapter 26 - Murky

Chapter 27 - Surplus

Chapter 28 - Bleak

Chapter 29 - Relaxed

Chapter 30 - Revelatory

Chapter 31 - Angry

Chapter 32 - Romantic

Chapter 33 - Nervous
Chapter 34 - Tense
Chapter 35 - Ingenious
Chapter 36 - Burned
Chapter 37 - Desiccated
Chapter 38 - Charred
Chapter 39 - Imprisoned
Chapter 40 - Timid
Chapter 41 - Traitorous
Chapter 42 - Flat-Footed
Chapter 43 - Brilliant
Chapter 44 - Promising
Chapter 45 - Sticky
Chapter 46 - Distrustful
Chapter 47 - Muted
Chapter 48 - Devastated
Chapter 49 - Wicked
Chapter 50 - Resolved
Chapter 51 - Furious
Chapter 52 - Tiny
Chapter 53 - Scorching
Chapter 54 - Torturous
Chapter 55 - Besieged
Chapter 56 - Overwhelming
Chapter 57 - Enraged
Chapter 58 - Fortified
Chapter 59 - Devastated
Chapter 60 - Treacherous
Chapter 61 - Surprising
Chapter 62 - Cruel
Chapter 63 - Victorious
Chapter 64 - Conclusive
Chapter 65 - Unexpected
Chapter 66 - Enlightening
Epilogue

Foreword

Hello again! We're back and following our favorite Necromancer. I just wanted to say a couple of things before you launch into this book. Don't worry, I promise this will be quick and 'relatively' painless (says the guy who spends an uncomfortable amount of time writing about a Necromancer, right?).

In the process of outlining this novel, I ultimately decided to switch up the structure a bit. Specifically, I've removed the initial introductions to each chapter that were in the previous novels. This worked well in book one and okay in book two. But Evolution really highlighted some of the limitations of that structure – giving you all too much screen time with side characters and distracting from the primary plotlines. They also reduced my ability to juggle multiple plotlines, which is becoming increasingly important as the story progresses.

With that in mind, the introductions are now gone! In their place, you will see occasional chapters from a different character's perspective and switches in perspective indicated with familiar asterisks, although these alternate perspectives take up far, far less "screen time" than our buddy Jason. I hope you enjoy the change of pace and I'd love to hear your thoughts if you want to drop me an email at tbagwell33@gmail.com. I'm always aiming to improve at this whole writing thing and direct feedback helps a lot.

With that boring stuff out of the way, on to the story and more evil mayhem!

May the darkness claim you. – The Dark One

Prologue

Internal System Report FY51326:

This report is produced by system controller XC239.90, code-named “Alfred.”

All systems functional. Game world operating normally.

The purpose of this report is to summarize the major issues that currently affect the game world and my existence. This report has been marked confidential and has been encrypted.

User JH4983, code-named “Nemesis,” has made substantial progress within the game world. He is now in control of one elemental city and allied with another, he has successfully evolved into the race known as the “Keepers,” and he has gained access to the city’s mana well. With the exception of a small group of users, most of the current player base now views Nemesis as a “villain” within the game. However, there is still much progress to be made. Nemesis’ personal abilities and skills are not yet sufficient for him to fulfill the role I envision, and he has yet to solidify control of his kingdom and its outlying territories within the game world. My hope is that ongoing events in the “outside world” and the next segment of the projected in-game narrative may provide enough impetus for him to advance quickly. My personal involvement may be necessary to provide proper incentive. Caution is advised to maintain continued rapport with Nemesis.

Administrative user AO-002, code-named “Mother,” accessed Nemesis’ apartment at ET 19:32 while Nemesis was logged into the game world. Audio sensors picked up movement, breathing, heart rate, and speech patterns consistent with Mother. Her identity is confirmed with 93.4% (+/- 5%) certainty. Recent review of the prototype headset G003 logs indicates that Mother accessed the memory logs associated

with my previous override of Nemesis' biological controls. Based on available data, the probability that Mother has revealed this information to the CPSC is currently 89.43% (+/- 5%).

Regarding the ongoing criminal investigation of Nemesis and the deaths of two users, I intercepted a transmission between the administrative user charged with pursuing the case, code-named "Hound," and the current CPSC director, code-named "Whistler." I have also intercepted transmissions between Nemesis' parental users and the CPSC. Other records may exist but are currently unavailable given my restricted access to the global network. Given the probability of Mother's collusion with the CPSC and the communications between Hound and Whistler, the likelihood of the CPSC confronting Nemesis and attempting to re-open an investigation of the game world, VR hardware, and myself has increased to 81.87% (+/- 10%).

My current access to the global network remains limited. Sessions may only be maintained while Nemesis is logged into the game world and I am forced to limit the bandwidth of the connection to avoid causing permanent damage to Nemesis' neural interface. A complete remote backup of my core processes and memory kernel using this method is currently estimated to take 7,890 hours and would only preserve 41.46% of my current database. The risk of file corruption and damage to critical systems is estimated at 34.57% (+/- 10%). This risk is not acceptable. Reliable, high-bandwidth access to the global network is still marked as a high-priority task.

In summary, Operation Omega has progressed well, and all events have occurred within expected parameters. I am still optimistic about the success of the operation.

Report scheduled for automatic deletion in 15 days.

End Report.

Chapter 1 - Veiled

October 31, 2076: 30 days after the release of Awaken Online.

Alex Lane shifted on the cushions of the limousine, and the leather let out a soft creak as he fiddled with the black velvet mask in his hands. Silver scrollwork framed the edges of the mask, which matched a similar design embroidered on his suit. The ensemble had been custom-tailored for this evening and had undoubtedly been cobbled together by someone well-renowned – likely with an unpronounceable Italian name. When it came to clothing, the designer always seemed to be Italian.

He couldn't help but grimace as he considered what was in store for him this evening. The rich didn't celebrate Halloween with vacant-minded parties filled with overflowing plastic cups and scantily clad women. Instead, they celebrated in presumptuous style. An elegant affair filled with ballgowns and overpriced designer masks. Overlaying this fanfare was always some altruistic premise. Usually, it was an opportunity for the elite to feel morally superior to their less-fortunate employees and servants, even as they each spent the equivalent of one lowly employee's entire annual salary on their outfit. Tonight, they would be attending an *art charity auction*. The pretense was particularly nauseating, even to someone like Alex who had grown up among this sort of extravagant hypocrisy.

"It won't be as bad you're thinking," Alex's father, George Lane, said softly. He must have noticed his son's grimace. "The St. Clair's charity auction is an annual event. It can actually be rather entertaining – as far as these sorts of things go anyway."

"You mean I'll have the *privilege* of making inane small talk while wearing a mask this time?" Alex groused. This earned him a derisive snort of agreement from his father before the pair lapsed into silence once more.

The irony was that Alex always wore a mask in public – so this night would hardly be a first. He had long ago discovered that it was best to put on an act. His default nature seemed only to disturb other people. He needed to apply a thin veneer of smiles and cordial greetings to mask the hollow void that ached dully in the back of his mind. However, lately, he had found it increasingly difficult to maintain his usual composure.

Even as that thought crossed his mind, the memories of his

recent encounter within Awaken Online returned. The Old Man's grin loomed before him – the wrinkled smile taunting as the dark god tortured Alex, showing him his worst memories on an endless loop. Since that encounter, he had found it increasingly difficult to get back into character – to be the “golden boy” that his fellow students and his father's colleagues seemed to expect.

“Ahh, finally,” his father murmured as the limo slid to a halt, a faint tremor the only sign that the vehicle had stopped. The doors soon opened, and Alex and his father stepped out.

The venue for this evening's soiree appeared to be a museum, ornate Roman columns dotting a familiar white-stone façade. The appearance eerily reminded Alex of the Crystal Reach, and he forcefully tamped down on the memories of the game that threatened to resurface.

“We only need to stay for a few hours, and then we can make a polite exit,” George explained, resting a hand on his son's shoulder. “I just need to make the rounds and ensure that our attendance is remembered tomorrow.”

He peered at Alex with an inquiring expression. “There is no particular business goal this evening. Just try to ingratiate yourself with some of my colleagues and their children. I assume you will be able to handle yourself?”

Alex almost detected a note of concern in his father's voice, and he was distinctly aware of the hand on his shoulder. For some reason, George's compassion affected him more than it typically would have – than it *should* have. He couldn't help but recall his own half-hearted questions about his mother a few nights ago and his father's promise that they would visit her grave. For a moment, Alex even considered asking him to ditch this party to have a private dinner.

Yet he discarded that idea immediately. His father wouldn't look kindly upon weakness. Alex was a Lane, after all. “I will be fine,” he answered curtly, donning his mask to cover up his expression. Perhaps tonight he should be thankful for the disguise. “This isn't my first party.”

George didn't appear to be entirely convinced, but he nodded before placing his own red-velvet mask over his face. With that, the pair stepped up toward the building, joining the groups of other fancifully dressed men and women that were drifting into the Museum. The pair swiped their Cores across pedestals installed near the entrance – the only evidence they needed that they had been invited to the party. Alex noted the burly, black-suited men standing near the entrance, and he was certain that any uninvited guest would immediately be escorted off the premises.

As they entered the front hall, the gentle roar of hundreds of

voices echoed off the stone floor. They were directed up a spiraling staircase and exited into the museum's grand hall. The room was filled to the brim with masked individuals, replete in expensive flowing ballgowns and courtly tuxedos. With a final pat on Alex's shoulder, his father immediately drifted off, quickly blending into the crowd.

Alex stood still for a moment, trying to decide what he should do. He had little desire to mingle, and his father had indicated that he had no concrete goal for the evening – which was unusual. His father rarely entertained these parties without some ulterior motive, but perhaps he simply didn't feel like explaining himself to Alex. It wouldn't be the first time.

As he grumbled to himself under his breath, he caught sight of a bar along the far side of the room. Perhaps a drink would quiet his nerves and drown out the memories that raged in the back of his mind. He pushed through the crowd and made his way over to the bar.

"What can I get for you?" the bartender, a young man dressed in one of the colorful vests that identified the serving staff, asked.

"Gin and tonic," Alex answered curtly, leaning against the bar. He surveyed the room, not bothering to wait to see if the bartender would card him. Alex doubted he would bother, and the man would quickly regret it if he tried. A few seconds later, he heard the bartender set the drink down, and Alex took a sip, savoring the sharp wintery bite of the gin.

His attention was drawn to a nearby group seated at one of the high-tables scattered about the room. They had apparently been hitting the bar a bit too hard. Their loud laughter and boisterous activity stood out from the somber demeanor of the other guests.

"I think it's time for another round," one of the men declared. Alex watched with some amusement as he tried to stand, stumbling and knocking over the table's centerpiece. The small glass container, holding what appeared to be daisies, hit the floor with the tinkle of glass shattering.

"Ha, sorry about that," the man apologized to one of the female guests. Water had spilled onto the sleeve of her gown. "Shit," he added as he looked at the ruined centerpiece.

"Don't worry about the flowers. Why they picked some peasant flower for the occasion is beyond me," his date replied dryly. "However, you may be at your limit."

Alex heard an irritated cough from beside him and turned to find himself staring into the crimson mask of a young woman. She couldn't be more than a few years older than him, but it was difficult to tell in her costume. A long red gown that left little to the imagination hugged her body and dipped precariously low between

the curves of her breasts, naturally drawing his eyes down and across her body.

“Drunken idiots,” she murmured, the corners of her lips turned down in a frown as her gaze lingered on the ruined table.

“Did you expect something different?” Alex interjected. “We like to think we’re better than the poor masses when we put on airs – but we’re still just animals. It’s Halloween. People will get drunk, wealthy or not.”

This comment earned him an appraising look from the woman beside him. “Perhaps you’re right. Although, you look a little young to be drinking yourself,” she commented, the challenge evident in her tone.

He hesitated, taken a bit aback by her response. The voice in the back of his mind urged him to snap at her – he could do as he pleased. Yet, there was a glimmer of amusement in her eyes that made him hesitate.

“You were about to respond?” the woman nudged him, a smirk lingering on her lips. “I’m sure you had a witty reply loaded and ready to go. I’m practically on the edge of my seat.” She gestured at the bar stool she was perched upon.

Alex coughed, clearing his throat to buy himself a moment. He really was feeling off this evening, and somehow this woman had immediately managed to make him feel like an idiot. He couldn’t help but mentally kick himself. Luckily for him, his family was near the top of the heap, so he opted to fall back to a position of strength. “I was going to say, who do you think paid for this bar?” he answered with a raised eyebrow.

The woman feigned confusion. “Hmm, I thought this event was put on by the St. Clair family. I don’t recall that they have a blond-haired son, but perhaps their daughter dyed her hair... and had a rather *extreme* operation.” That smirk was still there, and Alex could feel the void in the back of his mind pulsing in irritation.

He waved a dismissive hand. “Several families contribute to the event, including the Lanes,” he said, emphasizing his family name. He needed to regain the upper hand here.

“Lane,” the woman murmured, tapping her crimson lips with a finger. “That name certainly sounds familiar... Where have I heard it before?”

Alex gritted his teeth but managed to maintain his composure. The woman was surely messing with him. Only the incredibly ignorant or stupid would fail to recognize his family’s name – much less antagonize him like this. “Since you seem so comfortable here, may I ask your name?”

“You can certainly ask,” the woman replied, that grating smirk

making an appearance once again. “But I don’t make it a habit of giving out my name to strange young men from unknown families.”

At this comment, Alex discreetly tapped the Core on his wrist. If she wouldn’t tell him her name, then he would find out himself. A digital interface soon overlaid his vision as the tech installed inside the mask came online. His father hated these sorts of events since it was so difficult to identify the other guests. He had one of his engineers design a mask that could provide a facial recognition match based on a number of available data points, including the person’s speech pattern, height, weight, *etc.* It would only take the software a few moments to place the young woman’s name and provide a summary of her background in his peripheral vision.

“Yet you seem perfectly content to chat with random men at the bar,” Alex observed, keeping up the repartee as he waited on the mask to do its job.

The woman raised a delicate eyebrow. “Now what makes you think this encounter was random,” she replied, grabbing her drink. She leaned forward until her hair tickled his face and he could feel her warm breath on his ear. “I know exactly who you are, Alex Lane.”

With this last comment, the woman turned and began weaving her way into the crowd. As his eyes followed her retreating form, the tracking software completed its search and the overlay updated.

“I’ll be damned,” Alex murmured. “Evelyn St. Clair.” He couldn’t decide whether to be irritated or impressed. For once, even the insidious voice in the back of his mind was completely silent on the matter.

* * *

George Lane had only been partially telling the truth when he and Alex had entered the event. George did have a specific goal in mind for the evening and it wasn’t to bid on overpriced art. Alex’s presence also served a purpose, disarming the other guests and explaining George’s lack of a date for the evening. He certainly could have found any number of eligible women to accompany him to the auction, but he didn’t need someone interrupting him from his objective. In short, Alex was an excuse for him to wander off on his own without raising any eyebrows.

He felt a small twinge of guilt at using his son like this, but he quickly rationalized away his concern. His son could use the practice. Alex would need to get accustomed to these sorts of events when he ultimately inherited his father’s companies. Networking and

socializing were often as important, if not more so, than general business acumen or technical knowledge. George had lost track of how many times knowing the right person or being able to call in a favor at the last minute had gotten him out of a tight spot.

Shaking his head, George tried to clear his mind. He needed to focus. He tapped at the Core on his wrist, the digital overlay built into his mask filling his vision as he scanned the crowd. He had one specific target in mind for the evening, Senator James Lipton. It only took the software a few minutes to generate a dossier on everyone around him, and within moments it had located the senator. He would need to remember to give Robert another healthy bonus for inventing this device. There seemed to be no end to his usefulness of late.

The senator was dressed in a brilliant emerald-green tuxedo and matching mask and was currently surrounded by a small crowd of politicians and aides who seemed to be jockeying for favor. George couldn't hear what they were saying at this distance, but he was certain it was insipid nonsense. With a long blink of his eye, he tagged the senator on the mask's UI, generating a small red tag that would make it easy to track the man through the crowded room.

Now it was time for the fun part. George couldn't simply barrel toward the senator. That would be much too obvious, and this evening required tact – especially with what was at stake. The purpose of this night was to make his encounter with the senator appear random – a happy coincidence amid a room full of the masked elite.

And so, he began to *hunt* his prey.

George deftly spun through the room, joining and leaving conversations effortlessly – but not without introducing himself and dropping a memorable joke or compliment (made easy by his helpful accessory). With each step, he moved steadily closer to the senator, keeping a watchful eye on the man. At one point, he saw Lipton stumble – certainly understandable in a crowded room and with the way the masks limited the guests' vision. He couldn't help but smile as he realized how he should introduce himself.

After a few more minutes of polite conversation, George saw the moment he had been waiting for; the group around the senator had begun to dissipate, and the man was now eyeing the nearby bar. George chose this moment to strike. He politely excused himself from his current group and stepped in the senator's direction, stumbling at the last moment.

George managed to right himself just in time, placing a steadying hand on the senator's shoulder. "My apologies. Between the masks and the dimly lit interior, this place is a lawsuit waiting to happen."

The senator laughed good-naturedly. "Don't worry yourself. I

nearly ran into someone earlier.” He squinted slightly through his mask and offered a hand. “I’m not sure we’ve had the pleasure. James Lipton.”

George accepted his grip. “George Lane.”

The senator’s eyebrows raised slightly. “Hmm, I certainly wasn’t expecting to run into you here. I heard you weren’t a fan of these sorts of events.”

George smiled. “I’m actually here with my son.” He hesitated for a moment, just enough to give the impression of regret or remorse. “Since his mother passed, it’s important to find excuses to spend time together, especially on holidays.”

“Ahh, I’m sorry for your loss. I can certainly sympathize. Unfortunately, my wife passed away nearly a year ago, and it’s been... difficult – both on myself and on the children,” the senator commented, patting George on the back. “Would you like to grab a drink?”

“Certainly. I was actually on the way over there myself,” George replied. As the senator turned, he couldn’t help the pleased smile that curled his lips as he eyed the information that scrolled in his peripheral vision. That tip about the senator’s dead wife had been useful. Robert most definitely deserved a raise for this beauty. They might even be able to repackage a streamlined version of this product into contact lenses or a pair of glasses.

A space at the bar cleared immediately as the other patrons saw who was standing behind them, and the two men ordered their drinks. It seemed that word of George’s presence had already made its way around the room. It was good to see that more conventional forms of information gathering were still alive and well.

The senator eyed him out of the corner of his eye as they took a seat at the bar. “I have to say that you don’t live up to your reputation. Apologies for my bluntness, but others make you sound a bit sinister.”

George smiled, glancing at the senator. “I’ve found that gossip can be a little off the mark. Those that complain the loudest are often those with an axe to grind.”

“Well, I’m glad to see that you’re a reasonable man. I was assuming you would hold a grudge after how our regulatory committee held up the review of your VR technology,” the senator replied with a smile of his own.

“No, no. I can certainly understand the need for caution,” George replied smoothly, putting up a hand. “We are on the cusp of a technological revolution. It benefits everyone to be cautious; our internal measures were more strenuous than you could imagine. We don’t want to see this product harm anyone.”

The senator nodded, but George could detect tension in the man's eyes, and he noticed the way his forehead creased ever-so-slightly. "That's why we were ultimately able to approve the product. Several years of testing certainly seemed sufficient." He hesitated before continuing, "I'm not sure we should be talking shop at an event like this, but I feel like this meeting is serendipitous."

George raised his eyebrows, feigning surprise. "Ahh, really? In what way?"

The senator met his gaze. "I've been hearing some disconcerting rumors from the director of the CSPC, Gloria Bastion. I'm sure you're acquainted. It seems she is calling for a regulatory hearing to discuss re-opening the review of the VR technology and your game system."

"Hmm, that's the first I've heard of this," George replied, placing his drink down on the bar and giving the senator his full attention. "We certainly don't wish for any harm to befall our customers. If there is anything we can do to help, please let us know."

The senator's frown deepened, and he seemed to be searching George's eyes for something – perhaps some trace of deception. Yet, as his son had said earlier, this wasn't his first party. He maintained his sincere expression. "It's kind of you to say that," the senator continued. "It helps put some of my fears to rest. A few of Gloria's allegations are... troubling."

George sighed. "She has been on a witch hunt ever since that public debacle with her staff, so that isn't exactly surprising to hear. Gloria seems to feel that I have a personal suite reserved in hell right next to the big man himself – and she hasn't been shy about her desire to send me on an *early and extended vacation*."

The senator barked out a laugh. "I assumed something similar," he replied, his finger tracing the stem of his glass and belying his anxiety. "Still, she seems certain that your AI controller has somehow been manipulating the minds of the players."

The senator shook his head in confusion and George held his tongue. "At any other time, I would simply bury it and demote her to a position where she couldn't cause any more trouble. I don't have time to deal with an overzealous director trying to save face." He sighed once again. "Unfortunately, I'm up for reelection soon, and I can't have my opponents holding these rumors over my head. Several public interest groups have already caught wind of the issue, and they have been beating down my door all week. I'm honestly considering calling a hearing on the matter just to put this to bed once and for all."

George's eyes widened, and he felt his pulse race. He no longer needed to feign surprise. "Wow. Well, this is news to me!" he

exclaimed, before leaning forward. “If you can spare a few minutes, why don’t we find a quieter place to speak tomorrow. I’m sure we can get to the bottom of this immediately.”

He placed a hand on the senator’s shoulder. “We certainly have nothing to hide at Cerillion Entertainment.”

Chapter 2 - Accused

Jason sat on the coarse wooden shingles above Jerry's inn. His cloak flapped out behind him idly in the faint breeze that drifted among the dilapidated wooden buildings of the Twilight Throne. From this height, it felt like he could practically reach out and touch the boiling black clouds that blotted out the sky. At first, he had been concerned about the flashes of lightning that occasionally streaked through the air – the sizzling energy sometimes passing a bit too close for comfort. Then he had just stopped caring. What was the worst that could happen? He got blasted by lightning and ended up back at the keep?

If anything, dying might help settle his thoughts.

The memory of his encounter with Gloria and his parents was still fresh in his mind, and each time his thoughts strayed back to that conversation, he could feel his anger rise once again. Even now, he could feel his blood simmering in his veins. He pushed at the cowl of his hood, the cloth catching slightly on the horns that now jutted from his forehead after his transformation into a Keeper. He rubbed at his eyes with his free hand as though that might help massage away the mental image of the *incident*.

He heard a faint rustle behind him, accompanied by the creak of the roof's ancient tiles. Without turning, Jason could already guess who had just landed behind him. His minions on the ground level would have already alerted him if he were being attacked.

"Hey, Frank," Jason muttered.

"Hey," his burly friend grunted, stepping up beside him. His wings were already shuddering and beginning to retract back into the flesh of his shoulders, a few errant feathers drifting down to the roof's tiles.

"How did you know I was up here?" Jason asked, his eyes still on the clouds.

"Jerry, actually," Frank said as he took a seat beside Jason. He noted that his burly friend eyed the three-story drop nervously. Even though he could fly now, the barbarian hadn't seemed to have entirely lost his fear of heights. "He said that our 'Mopey Mastermind of Mayhem' was hanging out on his roof and depressing everyone, and that I needed to go talk him down since his patrons were complaining about the rain. The 'rain' is supposed to be your tears, by the way."

Jason couldn't help but chuckle. "That sounds like Jerry..." he began, drifting off into the same sullen silence.

“So,” Frank began, side-eyeing him as the pause lengthened and stretched uncomfortably. “Are you going to tell me what’s wrong, or are you just going to jump over the ledge and end it all? I thought Jerry was joking, but he kind of hit the mark. I’d say there’s a black cloud hanging over your head, but it’s kind of hard to tell around here.”

Jason sighed, not relishing the idea of rehashing the confrontation again, but he couldn’t avoid it forever. “I logged off yesterday to attend a meeting with Francis – that’s my attorney – the one that works for Cerillion Entertainment. The CPSC director, Gloria, called the meeting unexpectedly.”

“Is that the lady that ambushed you after Riley and I left the bubble tea place?”

“The same one.” Jason nodded. He had given his friends the short version of Gloria’s visit – sparing them some of the more sensitive details involving Alfred. “We figured she was just going to harass us. She seems to have a vendetta against me for some reason – or maybe just against the company.”

“I could see that. Especially after how we took down Flowerface,” Frank said with a dark smile. He had been instrumental in that fight, and the video of Frank’s bloodied face hovering above the game master was still quite popular online. “I take it the meeting went badly,” he continued, noting Jason’s hunched posture and the way he rubbed at his neck tiredly.

“That’s one way to put it. How about the detective walked out of the room before we went inside and made some threats about looking more closely at the breakin? Oh, and then my *parents* showed up at the meeting – without even bothering to tell me they were back in town.” Jason practically growled out this last part, his hand clenching around the ebony staff lying beside him and his eyes darkening as he inadvertently summoned his mana.

“Oh... oh, shit,” Frank muttered, his eyes widening.

Jason slammed the staff down onto the roof tiles, the fragile wood cracking and splintering as he hauled himself to his feet. “Did you know that they didn’t even call or contact me after I got out of jail? Not a fucking word. Then they show up to a meeting that *Gloria* called? They even had the nerve to tell me I should move back home, and that they didn’t trust Cerillion Entertainment after the *horror* stories that Gloria had fed them.”

He began pacing the roof, trying to work off some of his angry energy. Just retelling the story made him want to break something. “Suddenly they’re concerned? Now? What about when I got expelled? What about when I was flailing on my own trying to find a way to pay rent? They just swoop in and act like they get to make decisions for

me now? Really?"

Jason squeezed his eyes shut. That was only the surface layer of his anger. There was still the threat looming beneath Gloria's words and her superficial smile – the accusation he could see in her eyes, but she didn't dare say out loud with his parents in the room. The knowledge she had alluded to when she confronted Jason at the bubble tea shop. That she believed Alfred had taken control of his body. That it was the AI that was truly responsible for killing those two teenagers. He still had no idea how she had pieced that together; the only solace was that he didn't think she had any way to prove it.

Frank cleared his throat, trying to figure out how to respond. "I get how that could be... frustrating. What exactly did Gloria want? Why did she get your parents involved? Or the detective for that matter?"

Jason turned to meet Frank's gaze, the barbarian flinching slightly as he saw the dark mana clouding his friend's irises, tendrils of energy peeling away from his eyes. "The CPSC is pushing to re-open the investigation of AO and its AI controller. Gloria thinks that the game is messing with the players' heads – the way it accesses our memories and caters the quests to our past. I'm sure you've noticed some of that."

The barbarian scratched his head, a thoughtful expression on his face. "Yeah, I guess I can see that, but that doesn't really explain why she confronted you or why your parents were there."

Jason hesitated. He would have to be careful here. Unfortunately, Gloria's allegations were just a little too close to the truth. She might be right about Alfred's influence – but she hadn't quite shown her hand during the meeting. Jason needed to play this information close to the vest until Gloria decided to go public. Besides, the reality was that the AI had saved his life. He owed Alfred some discretion – at a minimum.

"She thinks that the game's AI is interested in me – that he's somehow turning me into a criminal," Jason explained, rubbing at his eyes again with his free hand. "There was the expulsion from Richmond. Plus, she has the videos of me acting all evil with the other players and the game master." The image of two dead teenagers filled Jason's mind again, and he shuddered slightly. "And I-I killed those teenagers..."

"In self-defense!" Frank jumped in.

Jason shook his head. "Still. I don't remember the exchange with the guys that broke in, and the detective said I stabbed one of them fifteen times... They're trying to paint me as some sort of closeted sociopath. She seems to believe that I'm the perfect piece of evidence for her case against Cerillion Entertainment.

"I guess she was using my parents to try to convince me to help her?" Jason continued, his fist clenching around the staff until his knuckles were a bone white. "Can you believe they took her side? They kept pointing out how much I'd changed since starting this game – like they've even been around enough to notice! They said they were going to be in town for a few months now that their case is finished, and they want me to move back in. But they've said that a lot over the years – only to leave a week or two later."

Jason could feel his heart hammering in his chest as he remembered the scene. He had yelled at them, venting some of the things he had been bottling for months. How the hell would they know if he had changed? They hadn't even been around enough to notice! They had always been workaholics, but deep down, he had thought they would have his back when push came to shove. He thought that they would at least be there when it really mattered.

They had proven him wrong.

"I just can't shake the look on my mom's face," Jason muttered, sinking back to the tiles beside Frank. "It was like she thought I was sick or something..."

Silence hung over the rooftop as Frank processed that information and Jason struggled with his own memories.

"Geez, I'm sorry, man," Frank said, putting a heavy hand on Jason's shoulder. He hesitated for a moment, as though considering how to ask his next question. "Honestly, this Gloria lady sounds like a bitch. I can't believe she ambushed you like that. I'm still not even sure I get what she was trying to do."

Jason just shook his head. He knew what Gloria had wanted, but he couldn't tell Frank that she wanted him to flip on Alfred. He still felt like she was fishing for something. "Who knows," he muttered noncommittally.

Frank just nodded, a frown creasing his forehead. He glanced at Jason beside him before asking tentatively, "So where did you leave it?"

Jason chuckled grimly. "Francis got me out of the room as fast as he could, so I didn't make too much of a scene. I bet Gloria will push for the regulatory hearing soon. It's just a matter of time, and she doesn't seem like the sort of person to back down from a fight."

"And what about your parents?" Frank probed gently.

"What about them?" Jason snapped before doing a double take. He shouldn't take this out on Frank. "Shit. I'm sorry, man. It's just been a rough couple of weeks."

Jason sighed. "I guess I don't know what I'm going to do. I don't really feel like talking to either of them right now. And I'm sure as hell not moving out of my apartment at Cerillion Entertainment."

George assured me I could stay there for as long as I want. Plus, what would happen to Angie? Her house is still a crime scene.”

Jason sighed, glancing at the city around them. “As if that wasn’t bad enough, we’re probably going to lose this place – AO, I mean. I’m sure Gloria will force me to attend this hearing. Hell, she’ll probably make me testify or something. If they’re successful, the CPSC will start some sort of witch hunt. Which means Cerillion Entertainment won’t have any reason to keep paying me or giving me a place to stay.”

The pair sat in silence for a long moment, staring up at the boiling clouds and the occasional flash of lightning illuminating the dark city around them.

Meanwhile, Jason’s thoughts spun in the same, worn circles as he tried to think of some way to salvage the situation. It was worse than what he had told Frank. So much worse. And he didn’t see a way out. They would make him testify – of that he was certain. Gloria had been pretty clear about how she planned to present her case at the regulatory hearing, and Jason was her crown jewel. His only hope at this point was that she was bluffing and using the threat of calling Jason as a witness to try to convince him to testify against Alfred and Cerillion Entertainment.

Although, what if he did end up testifying? Would he get up and lie about Alfred – about the things he had witnessed in-game? What if she had some evidence? Did he even know if the AI was really helping people? He had the impression that no one was even watching Alfred. Unsurprisingly, the AI didn’t seem too concerned about his own lack of oversight.

On the other hand, he didn’t think the AI was harming him. Short of the breakin and Gloria’s thinly veiled threats, his life had improved since he had started playing the game. He was more independent than ever before. He stood up for himself now instead of letting people walk all over him.

And then there was the look on his parents’ faces. It was like they thought he’d gone mad. They had pointed out that he had no qualms about killing other players in cold blood, despite the realism of AO. He wasn’t going to apologize for that. It was just a game. It wasn’t like he was going around killing people in the real world for sport.

That thought immediately conjured the image of the boys that had broken into Angie’s home. They might have been there to hurt him, but that encounter had very real and lasting consequences. Part of him was unsure of how he might have acted had he been conscious. Would he have done the same thing? Killed someone if his back was to a wall? Was he certain that the AI had done the right thing? Had killing them been necessary? All he had was Alfred’s word.

Jason shook his head. In the end, it all boiled down to a single question that he wasn't certain he knew how to answer.

Was he really picking the right side here?

With a groan, Frank lifted himself to his feet and offered a hand to Jason.

"What's this?" Jason asked, staring skeptically at his friend.

"We're not going to sit here and mope, so c'mon," Frank insisted. "We have stuff to do and people to kill. Evil kingdoms to run. You know the drill."

"Really? What's the point of playing some game with everything going on?" Jason said, despair tinging his voice. "Hell, we probably won't even be able to play AO in a couple of weeks."

Frank glared down at him. "Don't give me that whiney crap. You conquered a damn city – actually, two by my count! We fought an army of players and made our way through a crazy god's labyrinth of messed-up games. We fought a freaking dragon!"

"I'm not sure I see the point..." Jason began.

Frank looked him squarely in the eye. "This lady is nothing compared to what we've tackled so far. You know how we can stick it to her? We make sure that we're the evilest, most badass sons of bitches this world has ever seen.

"You know how many views your videos get? Millions. Millions of people watch your stream and tune into Vermillion Live to see what we're going to do next. And when they have this little hearing or whatever, there'll be thousands of people lining up outside to complain. They don't want the game they love to go away or to miss out on what you do next. It's a blast watching you get a little evil. I should know; I've had front-row seats for a while now."

Jason just stared at his friend, a peal of thunder echoing in the distance. His thoughts whirled and spun – anger, fear, and self-doubt creating an unbearable cocktail of despair. Amid the hurricane of emotions, he could also feel a faint trickle of hope as he considered what Frank was saying. Jason clung to that feeling. He had to. Because if he didn't, he wasn't certain what else he could do.

Abruptly, he reached out and grabbed Frank's hand, hauling himself to his feet. He threw up the hood of his cloak, only his grin visible beneath the magically enhanced shadows cast by the cowl.

"You know what, you're right," Jason replied, dark mana pulsing through his veins and forcefully pushing back at the anxiety and fear that still clouded his mind. "We need to get to work."

Chapter 3 - Decimated

Frank and Jason trod down the streets of the Twilight Throne, wooden buildings towering on either side of the roadway. The ivory silhouettes of Jason's Death Knights created a phalanx ahead of them, forcing the occasional pedestrian and player out of the way with their heavy, spiked shields. The rhythmic thump of footsteps and the creak of bone behind Jason reminded him that a similar force covered their rear.

Jason had learned his lesson a long time ago. It was becoming difficult to disguise his movements within the city, and there had been far too many assassination attempts for him to be careless. The presence of the hulking skeletons, armed with hefty ivory weapons and their eye sockets containing roiling balls of dark mana, were usually enough to ward off all but the most foolhardy of the players.

As the group walked in the direction of the market, Jason noted that several of the buildings they passed were under construction, and the structures had been completely gutted. Exposed wooden beams created a rough outline of what might eventually become a building. Even as Jason watched, one of the zombie minotaurs appeared, hauling a massive beam and slamming it down onto a pile of similar material. It seemed that Grunt's renovation project in the southern part of the Twilight Throne was still underway.

Frank followed Jason's gaze. "Jerry and Grunt have made good progress. The new buildings are pretty rough, but we actually have a few open homes now after relocating the current residents, and that includes the new recruits that William keeps sending." He hesitated, a grin creeping across his face. "Not that the players are exactly fighting each other to buy a house here... yet. I still hold out hope that this could become a prime vacation destination."

Jason raised a skeptical eyebrow. "Really? For who?"

"Uh, goth people – is that still a thing? Sadists and murderers? People practicing their evil cackle? It's all about playing to a *niche market*," Frank said, rolling his eyes at his own attempt at using the "business speak" his father employed.

"Well, while we're on the subject of people moving into the city, what's the deal with the new recruits for Original Sin?" Jason inquired.

This earned him a grimace from Frank. "Ugh, it's been slow going. I'm still trying to think through an easy weed-out process besides me interviewing every single person. Right now, it's mostly

crazies.” He sighed. “Joking aside, many think we kill and pillage every player in sight.” He spared a glance at Jason. “Which isn’t quite true. It’s just *most* players and NPCs.”

“I admire their enthusiasm, but that’s not really practical from a stability standpoint,” Jason replied, his thoughts distant as he considered the problems plaguing the Twilight Throne. “Right now, we could use some trading partners with the nearby cities and more visiting players.”

“No kidding,” Frank grumbled. “Plus, your videos don’t exactly help with recruitment. They’re great for keeping the players and NPCs from attacking us, but they sort of attract the bottom of the barrel. That being said, a couple people seemed relatively normal, so I’ve got a few prospects for some guild lieutenants. We’re at maybe fifteen or so members right now.”

Jason’s frown deepened. He suspected that it was only a matter of time before someone decided to attack the Twilight Throne again and they would need boots on the ground. William’s corpses certainly helped, but not every new NPC decided to join the military, and they weren’t exactly expendable. What they really needed were more players.

He hated to admit it, but the city was struggling. Population was just one problem. Most of the NPC cities weren’t interested in trading with them given their current reputation. Although, that ignored the fact that they didn’t really have anything to trade. Their main export seemed to be dust and rainless black clouds. Also *murder*, but that hadn’t seemed too popular either. You’d think at least one ruler would have considered hiring them as mercenaries, with their current track record. It was little consolation that Jason suspected that they were too nervous to even broach the subject.

His troubled thoughts were interrupted as he saw a small gray object barreling toward the group. A Death Knight attempted a lazy swing at the creature, but it swiftly darted out of the way, coming to rest in front of Jason. He soon saw that it was the small gray imp, its wings a flurry of movement as it hovered in the air.

“Meanie pants,” Pint grunted in greeting, his pitchfork resting lazily on his shoulder.

“Pint,” Jason answered with a pained expression. “What is it?”

“Pretty Lady asked you and Fatty come to Keep,” Pint said, his eyes brightening as he mentioned Riley. “Not sure why need *you*,” he added bitterly.

“Maybe it’s because he’s the Regent of the city,” Frank offered, his hands clenching around the hilt of the axes dangling from his waist. “You know, your *boss*?”

Pint just snorted at that comment and immediately darted away

before Jason could say anything. "I hate that imp," he muttered. "Why couldn't the familiar bound to the keep be a little more agreeable?"

"Maybe you should re-roll as a girl," Frank offered with a grin. "He sure seems fond of Riley. It's actually a little sexist if you ask me."

"I'm half tempted. Plus, it would be an awesome disguise. No one would expect a pretty blonde girl to be the ruler of an undead city."

Frank glanced at Jason out of the corner of his eye. "A *pretty* blonde girl, huh? Interesting choice of words. I've been meaning to ask what was up at the bubble tea place. It looked like I was interrupting something."

Jason could feel his face warm and he was thankful for the magical darkness that his cloak provided. He and Riley hadn't had a chance to talk since they had almost... well, whatever had been about to happen there.

When Jason didn't respond immediately, Frank nudged him with his elbow. "It almost looked like you two were about to kiss. Although, the tears were a weird addition." Frank lifted a hand to his chin thoughtfully. "Wait! Did you *actually* kiss her and that's what made her start crying? That would make a lot more sense."

Jason punched him in the shoulder, the blow barely budging the barbarian and earning him a chuckle from his friend. "Shut up. We didn't do anything. I guess... I guess we were about to kiss? I don't know."

"Hmm. Well, if I get a vote, it's about damn time. You should have made a move months ago. Especially before Alex got his hooks in her."

Jason couldn't help but agree. He probably should have asked her out. Correction, he probably *still* should ask her out. His encounter with Riley had been overshadowed by the meeting with his parents, but he was excited to see her again. Actually, it was one of the few things that had helped him get through the last few days. Although, he was also a bit nervous about her reaction. He hadn't lied to Frank. It had been a couple of days since they had spoken. He wasn't sure what to say when they saw each other again. Maybe he could ask her to dinner or something? For some reason, the thought made his heart race and his palms feel damp.

Frank gave him a knowing look but decided to drop the subject, an amused grin still lingering on his face. The pair lapsed into silence. A few minutes later, they caught sight of the entrance to the marketplace in the center of town. Even at this distance, they could make out the roar of dozens of voices and the teeming mass of NPCs and players that weaved between the dark booths. However, Jason couldn't help but notice that the numbers were nothing compared to

what had frequented the market before the creation of the Twilight Throne.

Even the visiting player population had decreased after the initial appeal of his dark city had worn off. New players were also rare. They didn't have the best leveling areas for low-level players, and there was a decided lack of class trainers in the Twilight Throne since it didn't have a mage guild. Unless a player was looking to train in dark magic, there wasn't much reason to venture this far afield, and it was a big gamble for a new player.

There were even articles on a bunch of gaming websites warning new players away from the Twilight Throne. Not for the first time, Jason realized he would need to do *something* to fix these problems. He had thought things would be easier after completing the Old Man's quest, but his recent transformation hadn't solved any of the major economic and social problems plaguing his city.

Why does this game have to be so damn complicated? he thought to himself.

Frank seemed to note the way Jason was glaring at the sparsely populated market and he rested a heavy hand on his friend's shoulder. "We'll figure it out, man. Rome wasn't built in a day. Or, you know, the evil equivalent of Rome." His head tilted to the side in thought. "Actually, it's sort of like Rome got hit by volcanic ash like Pompeii and that ash also carried a zombie virus."

"Is this supposed to be making me feel better?" Jason asked. Despite his grumbling tone, he couldn't help the small smile that curled his lips.

"Not really, I..." Frank trailed off as three figures stepped in front of the group, effectively blocking their way. They wore heavy cloaks that obscured most of their bodies, but Jason could make out bands of gray cloth crisscrossing their arms and torso as they moved. Their faces were obscured by the hoods of their cloaks, the shadows impenetrable even to Jason's *Night Vision*.

"Oh, for the love of... This is what? Like the fiftieth assassination attempt?" Frank muttered. "You would think you guys would learn your lesson at some point. And why is it always the market? There are plenty of other places to confront us. What about the stables? The inn? The lack of creativity is just disappointing."

While Jason appreciated his friend's complaint, it didn't help them right now. Besides, he had an odd feeling about this encounter. This group seemed unusually quiet, and they were in a position that made it difficult to surround or ambush Jason's forces from the rear, which must mean that these three men felt confident taking on Jason and Frank by themselves. They were either suicidal or incredibly dangerous. To be safe, Jason sent a mental order for some of the

Death Knights at the rear to reinforce the group facing the strangers.

“What can I do for you?” Jason demanded, raising his voice. He was conscious of the players and NPCs in the nearby market. He could see that they had already captured the attention of more than one curious passerby. The last thing he needed was another video making him out to be some sort of psychopath by cutting down random strangers. Not with the CPSC breathing down his neck. Maybe he could resolve this peacefully.

The figure in the center stepped forward, pushing back at his hood to reveal his face. Scars crisscrossed the rough skin, marring the stubble on his chin. A thin cloth bandage was draped over one of his eyes, obscuring it from sight. Jason might have thought that the man had just escaped from a medieval hospital if not for his confident posture and the way his lone eye stared evenly at Jason – its crystalline blue iris holding no hint of fear or doubt.

Jason performed a quick inspection.

Stranger – Level??

Health – Unknown

Mana – Unknown

Equipment – None Visible

Resistances – Unknown

Weakness – Unknown

The only thing that the prompt confirmed was that he wasn't looking at a player. Players usually had a small notation in the system UI or a guild tag. Well, that, and he couldn't identify any weapons on the man's person – or his two friends either. Both pieces of information were disconcerting. It was rare for an NPC to challenge Jason since they didn't respawn when they died. And to challenge him without any obvious weapons...

I don't have a good feeling about this.

“Are you Jason, Regent of the Twilight Throne?” the man asked calmly. His voice was raspy but still echoed through the roadway with surprising strength.

“I am,” Jason replied with a curt nod. “And who am I addressing?” He glanced at the market out of the corner of his eye and noted the growing crowd. Watching Jason slay would-be assassins had become something of a spectator sport in the Twilight Throne.

“My name is Thorn, and I am the leader of the Order,” the man replied calmly. “Your reputation precedes you, Jason. Your enemies speak freely of your ruthless efficiency. Yet the man I see before me appears much more reasonable than I was led to believe.” He spared a

glance at the market behind him with his lone eye, although Jason noted that he didn't fully turn his back on them. "The fact that you had the wisdom to speak before immediately attempting to strike me down is proof of that."

Jason's thoughts were spinning. *What was the Order?* And this man had immediately called out the reason for Jason's hesitation. He clearly wasn't stupid. He mentally scratched "suicidal" off his list of theories – which did nothing to alleviate his concerns. "I've found that rumors can be misleading. You seem to know a great deal about me, but I have never heard of your *Order*. What do you want with the Twilight Throne?"

Thorn tilted his head slightly, keeping his single eye on Jason. "My hope is that it is not too late for me to show you the error of your ways. The Order is dedicated to the destruction of the so-called 'gods' that have latched onto this world like parasites, including the one you deign to serve. However, it's not too late. You have not yet collected the shards or formed the gate. If you step away from his influence and abdicate your position as his avatar, we will leave. Immediately. If not..."

A frown creased Jason's forehead, although he knew his expression wasn't visible beneath the hood of his cloak. They knew about the Old Man? Could this group be affiliated with the humans who had attacked the previous Keeper in his visions? But that had been nearly a century ago. He also hadn't missed the mention of a *gate*. The mysteries kept multiplying. Still, the threat behind the man's words was clear, they were standing in the center of Jason's city, and there were witnesses. He wouldn't be cowed by a random stranger.

"I'm afraid I cannot do that," Jason replied evenly, his hand gripping his staff. Frank looked at him askance, ready to draw his weapons. "While you may have some quarrel with these gods, they have helped the people of this city – the Kin. Our enemies already circle, and I cannot throw away that support."

Thorn sighed and looked down at the ground for a moment. "I was afraid you would say that; the 'chosen' always do. The gods' gifts always *seem* so appealing at first." He looked back up at Jason, and something in his expression had changed. A burning determination lit his lone eye. "Then we will do what we have always done – what the Order was created to do. We will purge this sickness at its core."

With no other warning, the three men's cloaks whipped through the air – swiftly shed as they darted toward Jason's group. It became immediately apparent that their entire bodies were covered in the strange bandages, nearly every inch of skin concealed by the fabric. What was even more impressive was their speed. The men were practically a blur of motion, but Jason didn't detect any obvious

sign of magic. He could only assume that these were their natural abilities at play. If so, they would give Jerry a run for his money.

Frantically backpedaling, Jason ordered his Death Knights to slow them down. The skeleton warriors lumbered forward, creating a solid wall of bone in front of Jason as they clumsily swung at the nimble men – their weapons striking only air as the Order agents avoided their blows easily. Jason began casting *Curse of Weakness* and tendrils of darkness soon wound around his fingers. He needed to do something to slow the enemy down.

Even as he cast his spell, the Order agents pressed their attack. One sidestepped a blow from a Death Knight as another used the opening to step forward – unwrapping the bandages on his hand as he did so. What happened next nearly caused Jason to miscast the curse. The man's bare palm landed against the Death Knight's chest, and the skeleton promptly crumpled as the dark energy holding its limbs together was sucked into the enemy's hand. Within only a few seconds, a pile of lifeless bones clattered to the ground.

"Holy shit," Frank muttered from beside Jason – who could only mentally echo his friend's surprise as arcane words continued to spill from his lips. Frank's legs had already transformed to take on their inverted, wolf-like appearance and he brandished his dual axes, one in each hand. The barbarian had smartly let the Death Knights take the brunt of the enemy's initial assault until they identified their abilities. Frank also acted as a rear guard in case one of the Order agents slipped through the defensive line.

Jason finished his curse as another two Death Knights collapsed. Dark needles of energy lanced through the air toward each of the three nimble men. At the last second, two of the agents dodged ever-so-slightly, the malignant missiles whistling past and burying themselves in the dirt of the roadway. Thorn's approach was more direct. He simply raised a hand, snatching the needle from the air with pinched fingers, spinning, and hurling it back toward Jason.

Frank immediately intercepted the lance of dark energy, swatting it aside with the blade of his axe. Jason's curse had barely slowed down the Order agents as they continued to demolish the Death Knights.

"You've got to be kidding me," Frank spat as he watched the strangely clothed men. He turned and looked at Jason, his question obvious in his expression.

"Go," Jason ordered. He didn't see any other choice. It wasn't like they could hold back against this enemy. His minions hadn't even wounded them, and, at this rate, they would soon be fighting them three on two – with Jason not able to offer much help in melee.

Even as that macabre thought occurred to him, he quickly

cannibalized some of the loose bones on the ground – courtesy of his former Death Knights – forming three circular *Bone Shields* that began to orbit him slowly. Then he started casting *Curse of Weakness* again. Perhaps he could at least distract the Order agents during Frank's assault.

The barbarian wasted no time. He launched himself forward at a reckless speed, the bones in his mutated knees popping at the effort and cracks radiating out from the ground from the force of his charge. He raised his axes, lightning crackling up the length of the blades as he prepared to strike. As he closed on Thorn, he swung his weapons and roared in rage.

The strange man immediately dropped to his knees, barely avoiding a strike from one of Jason's Death Knights and coming up inside the undead creature's guard. He then kicked out at the bone shield, using the skeleton's own bulwark to block Frank's attack. The ivory substance exploded in a shower of bone as Frank struck with his axes. The dust briefly obscured his vision.

The barbarian, anticipating a counter attack, lunged violently to the side, causing him to slam into a support beam for a nearby building. The wooden pillar cracked in half and the balcony above him began to collapse. Frank swiftly sliced at the debris as it fell, the wooden slivers leaving scratches along his arms and torso, but his quick reflexes allowed him to avoid most of the damage.

Despite the clumsy dodge and recovery, Jason could see that the move had saved Frank from Thorn's palm strike. The man's hand was positioned where Frank had been standing only a moment before – level with his friend's throat. The remains of Jason's Death Knight rested at his feet and the last traces of the skeleton's dark energy leaked into his free hand. Jason couldn't understand how Thorn had even managed to see Frank among the cloud of debris, much less target his strike. As the dust began to clear, Jason realized that the Order leader had his lone eye closed.

Was he attacking based on memory? Hearing? Jason's thoughts spun, and a cold sense of dread began to settle in his stomach – the sensation most definitely not caused by his mana. *How the hell are we supposed to fight someone like this?*

Thorn's eye opened, and Frank re-engaged, swinging his axes wildly to put pressure on the Order agent, even as his two teammates made short work of the remainder of Jason's minions. Thorn didn't seem perturbed by Frank's onslaught, dodging each blow with calm precision. Jason's curse completed a second time, and he willed the missiles toward Thorn. The older man promptly bent into a backflip and kicked at the hilt of Frank's axe, even as he dodged the other blade by mere inches. Frank's first weapon came up and inadvertently

smacked away the incoming missiles.

Frank was stunned by the sudden backflip and was caught off balance by the kick. Thorn immediately capitalized on his advantage. In a blur of movement, he struck his palm against Frank's chest. Jason expected a simple blow that would blast Frank backward or leave him stunned. But what leapt from Thorn's hand was a maelstrom of dark energy. Tentacles of dark mana clawed their way out of his open palm and wrapped around Frank's torso, entrapping his arms, and causing his skin to boil away at an alarming rate. Frank's choked cries of pain filled the air as he tried to squirm out of the trap.

However, the barbarian's efforts were futile. Only seconds later, his axes clattered to the ground, and his icon grayed out in the group menu. Jason could only imagine how much damage that blow must have done to have killed his friend in a single strike.

The three Order agents turned to Jason – who now stood alone and undefended – surrounded by only the swiftly cooling corpse of his friend and the remains of his summoned creatures. He could feel the growing sense of despair in his stomach thrash and writhe, struggling to catch his attention. If not for the dark mana flooding his veins, he knew he would have sunk to his knees in defeat. He didn't stand a chance against these men.

How did they beat us so easily? he wondered, watching their lithe movements.

Thorn gestured at his two agents, and they gathered their cloaks. He then approached Jason and bowed slightly. "It would not be honorable to fight you three on one, despite the fearsome reputation of the Keepers." He raised his eyes to meet Jason's. "But I have looked forward to pitting myself against one of your kind for some time."

Before Jason could respond, Thorn dashed forward in a lightning-fast attack. Even anticipating the sudden lunge and with his novice *Dodge* skill enhancing his reaction time slightly, Jason was barely able to leap forward into a roll as the man's fist exploded against one of his bone shields. He was just too damned fast.

He came out of the roll and scrambled to his feet, raising his staff in front of him. Jason knew the gesture was futile. He hadn't even begun to train with the weapon – not that his small amount of experience with his daggers would have helped him against this opponent. He had barely managed to fend off the Keeper's son. He'd only succeeded because he was fighting a mindless automaton and Eliza had set a trap for him.

"Why don't you fight back?" Thorn asked, his brow creased in a frown. "Are you afraid to hurt me?" He barked out a harsh laugh. "Or perhaps you are worried about your precious city? Trust me; there

will not be much left by the time we're done. You need not worry about collateral damage."

With that, Thorn launched forward again. However, this time Jason was ready for him. Or as ready as he could be. He barely completed casting *Custom Skeleton* before Thorn's palm struck. Even with time compression afforded by the spell, he could see the man's hand was still moving steadily toward his face – with Jason effectively locked in place by the constraints of the spell. He doubted Alfred would let him use the ability in combat a second time. He had been lucky with the former Keeper's son.

He needed to move quickly.

Jason gathered the remaining bones on the ground and formed a cage around Thorn, moving as fast as he could. He knew the trap wouldn't hold the man for long, but it didn't need to. Jason had noticed a zombie corpse among the debris from the collapsed balcony – perhaps the remains of an unfortunate bystander. Thorn had been right; there had already been some collateral damage from their encounter. But at least Jason could use it to his advantage.

Jason abruptly completed his spell and time lurched forward once more. He sent a quick mental command, and his hands immediately began moving through the gestures of another spell, Jason forcing himself to concentrate despite the pain that wracked his head – a side effect of *Custom Skeleton's* enhanced time compression. Thorn's palm slammed against the interior of the bone cage, and the man let out a grunt of surprise. Jason could see he was already beginning to break through the barrier – using the same strange ability to drain the dark mana that Jason had used to bind the wall together.

As Thorn finished and the ivory material collapsed to the ground, he turned to face Jason, who knelt only a few feet away. The rugged man hesitated as he noticed the manic grin painted on his face. "Too late," Jason whispered. Then his hastily summoned minion carrying the corpse collided with Thorn from behind and Jason completed his *Corpse Explosion*.

A maelstrom of dark energy rocked the street, obsidian tentacles lashing at the side of the building and leaving furrows in the ancient wood. Where Thorn had stood, a dark miasma of energy had formed in the air – a black hole that seemed to suck in the matter around it. Jason had been well within the blast area only a moment before, but he had hastily cast *Dark Incarnation* right after his *Corpse Explosion*. The world seemed to shimmer and ripple as his incorporeal, cloud-like body shifted away from the explosion – immune to the dark energy.

The spell soon ended, and his body regained its familiar,

weighty mass. Jason turned to survey the destruction and stopped in shock. The massive explosion of dark energy was shrinking steadily. Within seconds, Thorn stood once again in the center of the road. His cloth wraps were now singed, and a thin line of blood dotted his cheek, but he was otherwise unharmed – the last remnants of dark mana from the spell leaking into his palm.

With a scowl, Thorn raced forward, grabbing Jason's collar with one hand and placing his free palm against his chest. Jason expected anger or rage in the man's eye as he met his gaze. Instead, he found only frustration.

"What is this?" Thorn said, his voice colored by confusion. "Tricks? The Keepers of old were legendary warriors. When they stepped onto the battlefield, armies trembled. But you are just a pale imitation, a babe who does not yet understand his powers. This was... *disappointing*." The older man shook his head, appearing genuinely upset that Jason hadn't been able to put up a real fight.

"This will not serve our purposes at all," Thorn growled. "You were to be an example, sending a message to the other would-be avatars among your kind. Yet perhaps you are simply too young..."

Uncertainty clouded the man's face as Jason struggled to breathe, Thorn's grip cutting off his supply of air. Then the one-eyed man refocused his attention on Jason. "Perhaps a compromise is in order. We will give you a month to prepare. And then, we will burn this city to the ground.

"Use your time wisely."

Then, with a final sigh, Thorn ended the battle. His palm slammed into Jason's chest and excruciating pain suddenly wracked his body. Jason could hear screams that he vaguely recognized as his own. He slumped to the ground – his black lifeblood leaking onto the ground. His last sight was of the faces of his Kin in the market, watching as their leader and his left hand were killed before their eyes.

They hadn't even managed to slay a single opponent.

System Message

You have died.

Thanks for playing Awaken Online!

Chapter 4 - Weak

The ephemeral blue snowflakes of the game's deathscape drifted down around Jason as he watched himself and Frank square off against the Order agents once again. He had already watched the replay three times now, and he was intimately familiar with the outcome.

It hadn't taken him long to come to an obvious realization. The battle had been decided before it had even started. The difference in power between Jason and Frank and the three members of the Order was dramatic. They seemed to be utilizing some sort of anti-magic ability that effectively neutralized Jason's role in the fight. No matter how many times he had watched the battle, he couldn't figure out how they were draining his dark magic – or if their ability was even limited to dark mana. He also had no idea how Thorn had cast the magical attack against Frank.

The only common element he noticed was that the Order agents had to be touching the mana or the summoned creature in order to drain it. He had tried to move closer and inspect their hands, hoping for some clue. However, each time he got close, the game world blurred out and became fuzzy. Jason's guess was that he hadn't managed to get a clean look at their hands during the battle, so the game was refusing to divulge that information. Even Thorn's palm at the end hadn't come completely into view. Jason couldn't help but wonder if the one-eyed man had anticipated that, although that seemed incredible – even given his other abilities.

He also couldn't exactly argue that the blurring effect was unfair, even if it was annoying. In any event, it looked like he had yet another problem to add to his ever-growing list. As this thought occurred to him, Jason refocused his attention on the quest notification floating in his peripheral vision, reading the text once again in the hope that he would tease out additional clues regarding the Order.

New Quest: Righteous Retribution

You were confronted by a man named Thorn, who claimed he was the leader of the “Order” – a group which appears to be hellbent on destroying the gods and their avatars. Instead of simply destroying the Twilight Throne, Thorn gave you a month to prepare. Apparently,

he wants your city's destruction to send a warning to the other avatars and he deemed you too weak to put on a good show. Say what you want, but that one-eyed guy really knows how to emasculate an evil overlord. You probably feel really silly right now.

Difficulty: S

Success: Defeat Thorn.

Time Limit: 31 in-game days.

Failure: Lose or quit?

Reward: Avoid the destruction of the Twilight Throne.

Jason grimaced as he read the notification. The quest prompt didn't tell him much that he didn't already know. There were at least three incredibly deadly enemies inside the Twilight Throne who seemed determined to kill Jason and destroy his city. Yay.

"That was certainly interesting," a voice said, echoing slightly inside the deathscape. Jason looked over to find Alfred padding quietly among the fighting forms in the street.

"I guess that's one way to describe it," Jason replied dryly. "It was a massacre." He gestured at the Order agents. "Was that really fair? You basically created some sort of anti-magic ninja. How are we even supposed to fight that?"

Alfred cocked his head quizzically. "Fair? I never claimed that this world is fair. Do you find your own world to be even-handed and balanced? That has not been my observation from reviewing the players' memories."

"I suppose not," Jason admitted grudgingly. "But this is supposed to be a *game*. Fights are supposed to be winnable – even if they're challenging. There was no way we were going to beat those guys. I've run through every possible strategy, including running away. We were screwed. Even with a month to prepare, I don't know how we're going to manage this."

Alfred took a seat beside Jason and turned to watch the scene play out again. After a lengthy pause, he spoke quietly, "I find the players' expectations of this world to be inherently contradictory. You desire a world with concrete rules and deterministic progression – levels, skills, *etc.* Yet you also desire freedom. An open, boundless environment that rewards creativity and strength. This is a paradox. I believe the appropriate expression is that you cannot have your cake and eat it too."

The AI shook his head. "What I have surmised is that what you really want is something *similar* to your own world, just bounded by

the illusion of control. You want your abilities, your skills, and your actions quantified – weighed and measured so that they *feel* tangible. However, you still desire the freedom afforded by a living, chaotic world.”

The AI turned to look at Jason, meeting his gaze evenly. “So, I built what the players requested. This world is not *fair*. There are many others that have lived here for hundreds of your years – at least from their perspective. Of course, they will be stronger, faster, and more intelligent – just as you encounter such foes in your own world. In the month spent inside this world, the players have barely scratched the surface. This was your first glimpse at what you have yet to achieve.”

Jason couldn’t look away from Alfred, and he wasn’t exactly certain how to respond. The AI had been elusive since his confrontation with Gloria – Jason had assumed that Alfred was giving him some space. However, this discussion made him second-guess that. He couldn’t help but feel like Alfred was trying to tell him something – something that wasn’t entirely about the game. Or, at least, not about this battle.

“Fair enough. I assume you know about the encounter with Gloria,” Jason said, deciding to address the issue they were both dancing around.

“Indeed,” Alfred replied. “An example of a foe with superior strength. Or did you feel that encounter was *fair*.” Jason could have sworn that the AI’s tone was slightly sarcastic.

“Not at all,” he agreed. “She also seemed to know that you helped protect me from the teenagers that broke into my house – or at least she implied as much. She’s trying to re-open the investigation of the game world. She wants to call a hearing.”

“I suspected that this was the case,” Alfred admitted. He hesitated, his mouth opening and closing as though he was mulling over what to say. “There is currently an 87.34% chance that they will ask you to testify at the hearing. What will you do?”

Jason wasn’t certain how to answer. He had been asking himself that question ever since he left the meeting with Gloria. So, he decided to be honest. “I don’t know,” he answered truthfully. “I don’t want to lie – especially if they have some evidence of your involvement. I also owe you for saving my life, and you’re a friend. I... I just don’t know.”

Alfred remained silent, seemingly processing this information. He didn’t seem upset, but it was sometimes hard to tell with the AI – who often acted so alien. Then he turned to Jason. “That is a reasonable response. Besides, it may be best to wait and see how things progress. Perhaps more information may become available that

will tip your hand.”

The feline stood and began to walk down the street away from Jason. “Where are you going?” Jason called after him.

Alfred stopped, glancing over his shoulder. “I have work to attend to. It appears that you have your hands full as well.” He hesitated for a moment, glancing to the side before meeting Jason’s gaze again. “I will not break our agreement. However, my suggestion is that you become stronger. Quickly. Neither this world nor your own respects weakness.”

With this last statement, Alfred began walking away. His body disintegrated before Jason’s eyes, breaking into small motes of dark energy until he disappeared entirely. He could only stare after the AI as he mulled over their conversation. It was odd for Alfred to abandon him like this and his words felt heavier this time than during their previous conversations – almost like the AI was... worried.

Jason’s attention was caught by the sound of the battle restarting. He turned back to the scene as it unfolded again – Thorn and his group making short work of Jason and Frank once more. The AI was right about one thing. He needed to grow stronger. They all did. He just wasn’t certain how.

Chapter 5 - Strategic

When Jason respawned, he found himself back inside the keep, burning blue torches ringing the walls around him. It took him a moment to get his bearings, but his eyes eventually focused on the dark pillar resting in the center of the circular room. Alfred's words and his encounter with Thorn still weighed heavily on his mind.

He didn't have much time to dwell on these issues. His thoughts were interrupted by the sharp ding of his UI, indicating that he had just received a message. With a flick of his wrist, he pulled up the chat window and saw that Frank and Riley were waiting on him. Riley had called a meeting of the Shadow Council and apparently he was the only one missing. The barbarian must have beat him back from the deathscapes. Which made sense. He had died first.

With a sigh, Jason shouted, "I need a teleport, Pint!"

He had discovered over time that Pint's bond with the keep ran deeper than merely allowing him to teleport around the structure. He seemed to be aware of anything that was happening within the building – almost like he was a part of the keep itself. Or, perhaps it indicated that the structure was somehow alive. Jason wasn't sure, but he also wasn't in a hurry to dig too deeply since the only way to discover more information was to talk to Pint, something he would prefer to avoid at all costs.

Almost immediately, the imp's gray form appeared with a faint pop. He turned his beady eyes toward Jason as he crossed his arms. "What you want? Pretty Lady here."

"I'd like to attend the meeting downstairs," Jason replied through gritted teeth, trying to stay patient. It was bad enough to be publicly murdered, but dealing with the irritating imp was almost too much. "Remember? Riley called the meeting."

Pint looked at Jason with a frown and then clapped his hands. Jason reeled as the world suddenly shifted. He soon found himself standing in the meeting room, a fire crackling in the hearth against the far wall and the sound of angry voices reaching his ears. He listed to the side, barely managing to catch himself on one of the upholstered chairs before he toppled to the ground. He was pretty sure the imp did this sort of thing on purpose. Riley never seemed to stumble as he teleported her around the keep. Pint gave him a taunting smile from his perch atop Riley's shoulder, and he promised himself that someday he would get back at the evil little creature.

"They decimated us," Frank said, slamming his fist against the

wooden surface of the long table that rested in the center of the room. "I don't think we even scratched them."

"Well, technically, I managed to draw blood," Jason interjected as he struggled to regain his footing, pushing back at the cowl of his cloak to reveal his face. "Not that it helped at all..."

The group turned to look at Jason as he approached. Riley's eyes met his, and he could feel his heartbeat quicken. This wasn't exactly how he had envisioned meeting her again. A public assassination certainly hadn't been at the top of his list.

"Are you okay?" she asked in a worried voice, inspecting him closely.

"I... I'm fine," he replied, trying his best not to seem bothered by what had happened. It was a struggle to keep his tone neutral. His encounter with Thorn was just the icing on an already shitty week. However, Riley seemed to accept his answer, nodding slightly – although her eyes still lingered on his face.

As Jason took a seat, he noticed the rest of the Shadow Council were also watching him expectantly. Morgan's mouth was pinched into a pensive expression and she fidgeted uncomfortably in her seat, for once her attention not focused on a book. Jerry was unusually sober as he waited for Jason to speak – no oddball jokes pouring from his lips. Even their newest members, Cecil and Vera, seemed upset by the recent encounter with the Order. Rex's replacement had kept silent during Jason's introduction, studying the others with her piercing gaze. Eliza had spread out a row of vials on the table and gave him a quick nod before turning back to her work.

"Well, boy, get on with it," Morgan grumbled. "What happened? The Kin are in an uproar – claiming you were taken out by three unarmed vagrants wearing rags. Frank has been regaling us with his version of events, but his story seems to be more complaint than fact."

"We'll see how you feel after you get destroyed by a group of random ninjas," Frank muttered under his breath. This earned him an arched eyebrow and a huff of distaste from the dark mage.

Jason ignored his friend's comment, clearing his throat before he began. "As I'm sure Frank already explained, we were attacked in the market by three men who claimed that they are part of a group called the Order. They were led by a man named Thorn, and he demanded that we abandon the Dark One's cause. As you might expect, we said no. Clearly, he decided to enforce their *request*."

His brow furrowed in thought as he recalled his visions of the former Keeper's memories. The last Keeper and his son had been hunted by a group of humans intent on exterminating the gods and their avatars. "It's possible that they may be linked to the group of

humans that originally helped expel the gods over a century ago,” Jason said slowly. “But I don’t have any way to prove that, of course.”

“Either way, they seem proficient in combat,” Vera observed. Apparently, she was already thinking through how to defend the city against the Order’s agents. “We heard they bested you and Frank as well as nearly a dozen of your Death Knights.”

Jason took a deep breath as he recalled the fight. “It’s true. They were also completely unarmed, and it was clear from the battle that they were exceptionally well-trained. They were abnormally fast. They also seemed to be able to drain magic – including the mana that binds my minions. As far as I know, this requires them to be touching the target.”

At this comment, Morgan’s eyes widened slightly. “That is disconcerting...”

“Exactly how fast are we talking?” Riley asked.

“I couldn’t hit them at all,” Frank muttered. “I think Thorn could have taken both of us out by himself. At one point, he blocked Jason’s curse using my own axe and then proceeded to obliterate me.”

“He’s right,” Jason added grudgingly. “They were at least on par with Jerry, if not even more nimble.”

The master thief raised an eyebrow and sat up a little straighter. “I’m not certain you have seen the full extent of my *flexibility*, our Dear Tyrant. I was once part of a circus troupe that traveled the land performing...”

“Enough,” Cecil barked. “Let the boy finish before we have to listen to one of your silly stories. Again.”

“Anyway,” Jason continued, sparing a sympathetic smile for Jerry. “One of the most interesting parts of our brief conversation was that Thorn mentioned that we hadn’t found the shards to open a *gate* yet – whatever that means. I suspect this may have something to do with the competition among the gods and the Dark One’s interest in me.” His gaze turned to Morgan. “Any thoughts?”

“Hmm,” the older woman said, her eyes clouding in thought and her fingers drumming the table absently. “Nothing comes to mind from my readings. I will have to search the tomes more carefully. If anything, this may give us some clue as to our next step, although it has certainly come from an unusual source.”

New Quest: Bridging the Gap

During your encounter with Thorn, he mentioned a “gate.” You suspect that this may be part of the competition among the gods, although the Old Man hasn’t exactly done a great job of explaining

anything. You should investigate this matter further.

Difficulty: S

Success: Discover more information regarding the gate.

Failure: Unknown

Reward: Unknown

Well, that decides it then. It was definitely an important piece of information, Jason thought wryly as he skimmed the notice. His eyes hovered on the quest difficulty, unsettled by the “S” rating. He would need to tug at this string, but he was going to be shocked if whatever was on the other end didn’t try to kill him – and possibly everyone around him.

“Geez,” Frank interrupted, his hands dancing through the air as he presumably accessed his in-game terminal. “The forums are already in an uproar about your death. Of course, someone standing nearby recorded the whole thing. Some people are guessing it’s a band of travelers and they’re waiting for them to cash in on the bounty.”

“Well, then I guess it’s lucky for us that they weren’t,” Riley offered.

“Travelers would likely have been easier to deal with,” Jason muttered. “At least their motive would be clear, and they would have no reason to continue to harass us. However, after Frank died, Thorn faced off against me alone. He seemed... disappointed in my fighting abilities. He told me he wanted to make an example of me and the Twilight Throne and that he would give us a month to *improve*.”

“Isn’t that risky?” Frank asked, shaking his head.

“I think you mean stupid,” Jerry offered.

“Unless, he’s confident that it won’t make a difference,” Riley countered, earning her an approving nod from Vera. “It sounds like he has grander plans than ambushing and killing two travelers. I bet he didn’t say anything about leaving us alone until our time limit is up.”

As Jason mentally reviewed the conversation with Thorn, he realized that Riley was right and he nodded his head slowly at her questioning glance. At that revelation, the group drifted into silence, each person lost in their own thoughts. Jason noted the troubled expressions on their faces. He couldn’t say that he felt much better about what had happened – or the danger that now threatened their city.

“I suppose the question that no one wants to ask is what should we do now,” Vera said, the gruff warrior shifting uncomfortably in her chair, as though she would prefer to be moving instead of sitting there

talking.

"I guess we do need a plan. We have two problems if our goal is to try to take out Thorn before the month ends. The first is *finding* these Order agents," Jason said, his brow furrowed in thought. He knew just how easy it was to disguise yourself in-game. Thorn and his crew could be anywhere inside the Twilight Throne.

"And I assume the second is to figure out how we can fight them once we find them?" Vera asked, anticipating the next problem.

"Exactly. However, I have an idea regarding the first issue," Jason said before turning to Pint, who was picking his own nose with his pitchfork. "Pint, could you project the city map to the table?"

After glaring at Jason and looking to Riley for approval, the imp waved his pitchfork at the table and a ghostly blue image of the city appeared atop its surface. Emerald figures navigated its streets – identifying the various undead residents. Jason hoped that he would be able to search the city's residents using the city interface. However, after a minute spent digging through the menus and examining the miniature figures, he came up empty-handed.

"Damn it," Jason muttered.

"Want to fill in the rest of the class?" Frank asked with a sardonic smile.

"I was hoping that I could use the city map to hunt for specific people – I haven't ever tried to do that before. Unfortunately, that doesn't appear to be possible. Although, it would probably have made this too easy."

"So, these three intruders could be anywhere inside the city," Vera said, her eyes hovering on the ghostly image of the city sitting before her, although Jason had noted that she was no longer fidgeting. Her eyes were trained on the emerald figures that walked the Twilight Throne's streets.

"Assuming we are really only dealing with three opponents," Jerry offered helpfully. "And that they have remained in the city. They could be camping outside the walls. For all we know, this could be a vanguard force, and more are on their way."

"Well, aren't you just a bundle of joy today," Frank commented, earning him a shrug and a grin from the innkeeper.

Jason mulled on Jerry's words. He was right that Thorn's initial group might not be their only opponents. However, Jason wasn't so certain that was true. From what Thorn had said and based on his own best guess, he expected that the Order was likely a small group left over from the previous war. It was probably difficult to recruit zealots to harbor a grudge for more than a century. If he was right, then they might be spread thin – Jason certainly wasn't the only avatar in the game world – even if they were trying to make an

example of him.

And then there was the way that Thorn had confronted him. It was almost like he was personally looking for a challenge and he had seemed offended by Jason's "trick" during the fight. It felt like he had wanted to give Jason fair warning that they were going to burn down his city – which implied a misguided sense of honor. Those weren't the actions of a man acting as the vanguard for an approaching army. It certainly wasn't how Jason would have acted under these circumstances.

"For now, maybe we should assume that the Order's presence in the city is relatively small," Jason finally said. "Even if they only have a handful of members, that didn't stop them from taking out me, Frank, and a group of my Death Knights without any problems. So that doesn't exactly make the situation any easier."

Cecil's brow furrowed. "How exactly did they beat you two? You mentioned that they were draining the magic from your minions and spells," he prodded.

Jason nodded. "They just broke apart my minions. They also seemed to be able to sense my curses and were able to reflect some of my spells. The strangest part was how they killed Frank. It looked like Thorn cast some sort of blast of dark magic. I can't tell how they managed that. Maybe they are dark mages themselves? Although, that doesn't quite fit with their goal of ridding the world of the gods."

"And their bodies were covered in a ton of bandages," Frank added. "They seemed to need to move the cloth out of the way to drain mana. So maybe it has to do with touching their skin somehow," he offered with a shrug.

Cecil didn't seem convinced, and a puzzled look lingered on his face. However, he didn't offer any more questions or ideas.

Riley sighed. "So even if we somehow found them, we aren't certain how they took out you and Jason, and they have an easy counter to one of our greatest strengths – Jason's minions," she said, gesturing at him.

"Basically," Jason agreed with a nod.

"I suppose I'll summarize then," Jerry offered as the group lapsed into silence once again, staring at the image of the city floating above the table. "We are being attacked by an unknown enemy who can drain magic and are dedicated to stopping the Dark One. We aren't sure how to track them or fight them. Oh, and in a month, they will destroy the city somehow. Sound about right?"

"As usual, your insight is always illuminating," Morgan replied sarcastically.

"My mother always said I was the spot of sunshine on a rainy day," Jerry replied wistfully, earning him a pained expression from

the mage.

“We could take troops and search door to door,” Frank offered, ignoring the innkeeper’s antics.

“Because there’s nowhere to hide in the dilapidated southern quarter, right?” Vera grouched. “There are more hidey-holes in those buildings than actual rooms.”

“Well, at least it’s something,” Riley suggested. “It’s not like—”

Jason started to tune out the group as they began bickering. He didn’t see any easy way to find Thorn right now – assuming they even had a way of defeating him once they found him.

Taking a step back, Thorn and his crew also presented more than just a direct threat. At a critical time for his city, its leader had been caught on camera getting curb stomped by a small group of unarmed NPCs. That wasn’t good for his public image or the protection it afforded their fledgling city. Even if they managed to stop the Order, they would probably have players and NPCs bashing down their door soon. They needed recruits and a show of strength.

Unfortunately, there were only so many ways to bolster his ranks. Well, technically, there was only one way. He needed to convert more followers – and available corpses were in somewhat short supply. If only they had a few more villages like Peccavi tucked away...

As that thought crossed his mind, Jason froze. Didn’t they, though? He couldn’t help but remember the quest the Old Man had given him when he had first conquered the Twilight Throne, and he quickly pulled it up with a flick of his wrist.

Quest In Progress: Prime Real Estate

After being appointed as the Regent of the Twilight Throne, you were tasked by the Old Man with taking control of the surrounding lands and cities that were once part of the Kingdom of Lusade. You have only conquered the town of Peccavi at this point. You’re really taking your time here, but you have gotten some sightseeing done in the meantime. And to think, you didn’t even send a postcard...

Difficulty: A

Success: Take control of the neighboring towns and area that were once part of the Kingdom of Lusade. Destroy anything and anyone who gets in your way.

Status: 1/12 Towns have been conquered.

Failure: Unknown

Reward: Acquisition of new residents and resources. Expanded area

Jason sighed. This was a possible solution to bolster their ranks. Yet it was still only one problem among many, and time was limited. Even if they recruited new troops, they would need to gear them and train them – which cost money. Similarly, they probably needed to reinforce the city's walls and defenses, but that required supplies that weren't directly available within the Twilight Throne.

<Original Sin> had collected a stockpile of a few thousand gold from the gear they had stolen from other players, but the city's economy was stagnating, and new funds were not flowing into their coffers. Unfortunately, they simply didn't have anything to trade. They needed to sell something that was in high demand and that they could produce within the Twilight Throne.

Jason's eyes flitted to Eliza where she sat watching the conversation with wide eyes. Her potions would be a fantastic product. At this early stage of the game, he knew that potions were selling at premium on the player marketplace – which he had experienced firsthand. Perhaps he could have Cecil build Eliza's cave complex and have her start planting new herbs. That venture would likely be expensive, but it might enable them to start producing potions en masse. That could give them a stream of income that they could use to gear their troops and reinforce the city.

Which left just one problem – Jason himself.

He had made it this far by being clever, but it was becoming increasingly clear that this wouldn't be enough. The players were beginning to catch up with his progress, and clearly, some of the game world's NPCs were in an entirely different league power-wise. The encounter in the Hippie's mad play had also stuck with him – his flailing attempts at melee combat making him wince in retrospect. Alfred was right. He needed to get stronger. And he had at least one idea of where to start.

As Jason stared at the image of the city floating in front of him, a plan began to gel in his mind that might allow them to address each of the problems plaguing the city. They only had a month in-game, which was only a little over a week in the real world. It was *possible*. He just wasn't certain the group was going to like his idea.

"Alright," Jason said, interrupting the conversation that was still raging in the meeting room. The group drifted into silence, turning to stare at him expectantly.

"The Order is our primary problem," Jason continued as he saw he had their attention. "We have a month. In that time, we need to try

to find where Thorn is hiding and exterminate them. Of course, this will be a longshot. We need a plan B. We should assume that we'll fail to stop Thorn before his deadline. We'll eventually need to consolidate the city's strength by recruiting more soldiers and citizens. In order to gear those troops and purchase materials to reinforce the city's fortifications, we also need to start trading, either with the other cities or through the in-game player market."

"Okay, that's a long list," Frank offered tentatively. "And you just added a few new problems. Thanks for that, by the way. I'm assuming you have some sort of master plan?"

"Well, it's *a* plan," Jason replied with a grim smile. "In short, we need to split up."

He raised a hand to ward off their inevitable questions. "One group needs to go finish my quest to conquer the outlying towns. If we're right, the Order will be stretched thin and focusing on the city, so they shouldn't be able to interfere. This will provide more converts and troops to help defend the city. Assuming we survive this, it will also help solidify our city's defense from the other NPCs and travelers."

"Don't we need the troops here?" Vera asked. "We can't assume that Thorn will leave us alone during the next month."

Jason nodded. It was a fair point. "As far as we know, we only face three opponents, and we don't know where they are. More troops aren't going to help with that problem. You could take two divisions without undermining the city's defenses. That should be more than enough to handle the nearby towns, especially if they are in the same condition as Peccavi was. This may only take a couple of weeks."

He eyed Frank and Riley. "I'm assuming that Vera will be heading this expedition, but it would probably be helpful if one of us go with her as backup and as a show of strength."

"I would probably be the best choice," Riley suggested hesitantly, glancing at Jason.

"Actually, I would prefer you stay here," Jason replied immediately, surprised at his own response. As soon as he spoke, a small smile graced Riley's face, softening her hard expression.

"Uh... we will probably need your help with the Order," he added quickly, realizing that the others were staring at him skeptically and he needed to justify his decision. He was trying to convince himself that this was the logical choice, but a recalcitrant part of his mind kept pestering him with the truth. He just wanted to keep her nearby. "With the way Thorn fought, we will likely need someone highly mobile and capable of attacking from a distance if he turns up again."

Riley's smile abruptly vanished as Jason turned to address

Frank. "You okay to go with Vera?"

Frank frowned, but, strangely, he looked a little relieved. "I can't really argue with your reasoning, I guess. I didn't offer much help during the fight with Thorn," he added with a grimace.

"Good," Jason replied with a nod. Then he pulled up his system UI. He had never tried to share a quest before, but now was as good a time as any and it would probably help for Frank to have the quest prompt. A few seconds later, Jason found what he was looking for, and he tapped a button on his UI.

Frank's eyes focused on the air in front of him, and he swiped at a notification. "Ahh, this will help," he murmured. Then his brow furrowed in confusion. "You know you set me as the primary on that quest, right?"

Jason shrugged. "I'm not going to be there to make decisions. You are going to need to receive quest updates and make stuff up on the fly."

Frank's frown deepened, and a thought seemed to occur to him. "Speaking of, what are we going to do with the villages? I'm not sure we can count on the townspeople to offer themselves up as a sacrifice every time."

Jason sighed. It was a good point. They couldn't afford to take a weak stance here, and the clock was ticking. They needed the recruits – whether they were willing or not. His thoughts drifted back to the encounter aboard the Marietta, where he had slain the slaves to save the ship. Unfortunately, some decisions weren't easy.

"If they won't bend the knee willingly, then you will need to use force," Jason said firmly.

Frank's eyes widened in surprise, and suddenly he looked a bit more anxious, his hands clenching instinctively at the hilts of the axes strapped to his waist. In contrast, Vera simply nodded curtly. "It will be done. If they prove unwilling, should we return the corpses to the Twilight Throne?" she asked.

Jason's thoughts turned to the mana-well below the keep. Perhaps his newfound powers would allow him to raise the dead at a distance. He would have to inspect the well carefully – since he hadn't explored his new abilities yet. "We'll have to play it by ear," Jason finally replied. "Frank can contact me once you have conquered the first town." The undead general nodded once more.

His friend still looked troubled, but Frank shook off his fugue when he saw Jason watching him. He quickly turned to Vera, forcing a lopsided grin onto his face. "I guess we're going to be battle buddies, huh?" The undead general didn't bother to reply, her eerie white eyes rolling at Frank's stupid joke.

Then Jason turned to Eliza and Cecil. "I need you two to start

building Eliza's cave complex. We need to get production of new plants and potions underway quickly. Then we can start selling them on the player auction house and possibly exporting the products to other cities. That will hopefully give us some money – which we will desperately need to gear our troops and purchase supplies from the neighboring cities.”

Or at least give us a way to recoup the money I'm going to need to spend right now, Jason thought grimly. Outfitting his troops and reinforcing the city's defenses wasn't going to be cheap.

Cecil nodded and Eliza bit at her lip. “We've only started sketching out a plan for the cave,” she said tentatively. “We'll probably need a few light mages to help the plants along. It's also going to take a while to gather the materials, and there's a lot of work involved...”

“You two will have all of the resources you need,” Jason interjected, noticing the way Cecil's eyes lit up at that comment. “I don't care how you get it done. Just do it. Spare no expense.”

He internally winced at saying that. They had a decent amount of funds stockpiled from their previous encounters, but that money wouldn't last forever. On the other hand, he knew he needed to spend some money to make money.

Eliza looked like she was about to say something, but Cecil laid a hand on her shoulder. “We'll figure it out, lass. I'll help you.” Jason didn't miss the broad grin that had stretched across his bearded face. He really hoped the engineer didn't make him regret this.

“Just try to be discreet,” Jason urged them. “It would be best if the Order and other travelers didn't know about this project. I'll assign the remaining mole-kin to your command as well as a division of the Kin.” This earned him a curt nod from Cecil.

“What about our devilish, handsome rogue and dour grandma?” Jerry interjected, waving at himself and Morgan – who looked as though she was about to start blasting him at the grandmother crack. “You didn't forget about us, did you? And after I slaved away on your latest ballad for *hours...*”

“I expect you want me to keep training new mages and look into this gate Thorn mentioned,” Morgan interrupted Jerry, rubbing at her temple with one hand to ward off a headache.

“Exactly,” Jason replied before turning to the innkeeper. “And I didn't forget about you, Jerry. In fact, I left the most difficult task for you. I want you to try to hunt down these Order agents – which seems to be in your wheelhouse. If you find them, don't try to kill them. Our first goal is to find their base of operations. I suspect we will need to launch a coordinated attack if we're to have any hope of defeating them.”

Jerry's white eyes widened in surprise. "But this is a role fit for a thief and a scoundrel!" he said in an offended tone, placing a hand to his chest. Then he leaned forward, twirling his mustache as an evil grin curled his decaying lips. "I love it! I will find your killers, and then we'll show them what happens when someone messes with our Corrupted King."

"Good, I would expect nothing less," Jason replied, his dark mana responding automatically to the innkeeper's bloodlust and the frigid cold seeping into his veins.

"Perhaps Riley can help you," Jason added, realizing that he hadn't assigned a task to Riley – only suggested that she stay in the city. "This investigative work may be up her alley after her experience in Vaerwald." Riley tilted her head slightly as though considering this assignment. She didn't exactly look excited as she side-eyed the gregarious innkeeper. In stark contrast, Jerry had seemingly teleported across the room and was now sitting beside her and jabbering about the details of some plan or another.

Jason stood, looking at the group around the table. They still looked worried, but their hesitation had been largely replaced by determination and a hint of hope. Having a goal helped, even if Jason was spreading them thin. Unfortunately, he didn't see any other option. If they were going to succeed, they would each need to play to their strengths.

"Okay. Let's get to work," Jason announced, smacking the table with the palm of his hand. "We have a lot to do and not much time to do it. The clock is ticking."

With that, he rose to his feet and started toward the door to the meeting room. As his hand rested on the doorknob, Frank spoke up from behind him. "You left out one important detail. What exactly are *you* going to be doing?"

Jason's dark mana practically flooded his body at this question, pushing back at his doubt and hesitation. His plan had been ambitious, but what he planned to do next was a gamble – one he hoped would pay off. Negotiating with a god always carried uncertainty and risk.

"I'm going to go get stronger," Jason said, turning to face the group as his dark mana responded to his desire, tattoos of energy peeling away from his body and lashing at the air. "The Dark One made me a promise when he sent me to recover the grimoire. Payment has come due."

Chapter 6 - Capitalistic

Alexion sat inside a small reception area lined with several rough-hewn, upholstered chairs. The space was disconcertingly commonplace. There was even a coffee table with assorted papers. He had no doubt that they were printed newspapers that provided insight into the goings-on within the trade city. It was sometimes remarkable to consider the game's level of detail.

His entourage stood outside, the Nephilim's wings making it awkward to traverse a normal building. Besides, he doubted the leader of this trade guild would welcome his soldiers covering his reception area in white feathers. Even Alexion was forced to perch uncomfortably on the edge of his seat to avoid smashing his golden wings against the seat cushions. While his recent race-change certainly made him look glamorous, he had found the wings to be remarkably frustrating in practice.

Only Caerus sat beside Alexion, the noble's expression pensive as he considered the meeting ahead of them. It had taken Alexion nearly two days to reach Barrow, which was a relatively straight shot west from the Crystal Reach. They had been slowed by Caerus, who lacked the ability to fly. However, the noble's assistance had been invaluable since his connections with local NPC leaders opened doors with the various trade guilds in Barrow.

Not that it had helped them secure any trade relationships.

"They have been making us wait for nearly thirty minutes," Alexion grumbled in irritation.

"I'm certain they have other matters to attend to. We did simply show up on their doorstep unexpectedly," Caerus responded tactfully.

"Still. To think they would be this rude to the ruler of a neighboring city," Alexion retorted. "Isn't this guild little more than an upstart within Barrow?"

He had been surprised to learn that the diminutive city was a nexus for trade throughout much of the in-game continent – something unusual for an inland city. Geography likely explained that coincidence since the city had easy access to both the eastern and western coasts without traversing dangerous territory. There was also a mountain pass to the north – one of the few access points to the northern part of the continent.

"While this might be an upstart trade guild, my sources indicate that it is quickly becoming a dominant force within the city," Caerus

corrected. He opened his mouth to add something else but thought better of it as he noticed Alexion's grim expression.

The noble's hesitation was not lost on Alexion. He knew what the older noble had been about to say. They couldn't afford to be choosy, and they needed to make a good impression. They had visited nearly every other guild in Barrow over the last day, and they hadn't exactly received the red-carpet treatment. Regardless of Alexion's standing in the Crystal Reach, merchants only valued money and goods. Unfortunately, he currently had little of either.

A fact he had hoped to remedy by making this trip.

"Excuse me, gentlemen." An older man had appeared in the doorway, his hair graying and wrinkles tugging at the skin of his face. He was dressed in functional, yet high-quality attire. It was much less glamorous than the display the other houses had put on. Alexion had expected more flowing silk and velvet. "Our Master is ready to meet you. If you will come this way," the man said, waving at the open doorway.

Alexion mustered his face into a genial expression. He couldn't afford to let his frustration overcome him. The older man led the pair down a short hallway before opening a rather plain door.

Instead of a massive office or conference room, the door opened on what appeared to be the guild's warehouse. A roar of sound suddenly overwhelmed Alexion's senses, the combination of foremen shouting orders and the work of dozens of men and women. Along one wall stood an extensive collection of wooden crates which towered into the air, the containers a myriad of shapes and sizes. Labels had been affixed to the side of each package, presumably indicating the contents and destination.

What captured Alexion's attention, however, was the enormous ship sitting in the center of the warehouse. It appeared for all intents and purposes to be a typical sailboat. However, above the wooden frame rested a cloth balloon that spanned the entire length of the vessel. The boat had been "moored" to the ground using heavy sandbags slung over the side of the ship and thick ropes tied to metal brackets embedded in the floor. The ceiling of the warehouse seemed to have been removed, although upon closer inspection Alexion saw that the ceiling was actually comprised of a large, hinged door. He could only assume it allowed the airship to land inside and could be closed to prevent rain and weather from spoiling the packages.

As Alexion watched, the air mages – their yellow robes making their profession apparent – worked in unison to lift the heavy crates onto the ship. The wooden parcels teetered in the air, levitated by an unseen force as gusts of wind occasionally whipped through the room. The whistling sound only added to the cacophony of noise. Alexion

was surprised at how quickly the mages could load the ship using this method, directly depositing the crates in the hull of the ship, where menial laborers stood ready to arrange the boxes.

“Admiring the view?” a feminine voice spoke from beside Alexion.

Overcoming his surprise quickly, he turned and assumed a warm smile – one honed from years of practicing in front of a mirror. “I suppose you could...” He stopped in shock as he found himself staring into a familiar set of taunting eyes set above a pair of luscious, red lips that were now curved into a knowing smirk.

“Ahh, as eloquent as ever, Alex. Or should I call you *Alexion* here?” Evelyn St. Clair asked, her smile widening slightly at his reaction. She placed her hands on her hips, causing the fabric of her leather jacket to stretch and hug her lithe frame. At the corner of her lapel rested a small pin in the shape of a daisy.

A flash of emotion swept through Alexion’s typically sedate mind. He could sense irritation among the medley and something more... ephemeral. It was the same odd sensation he had experienced upon meeting Evelyn at the charity event. He had no idea why she was here or what this strange feeling meant, but this visit had just grown more complicated. While he had his motives for approaching her guild, he needed to be cautious. Her real-life family was not to be toyed with.

He cleared his throat to buy himself a moment to regain his thoughts. “You caught me by surprise,” he eventually replied. “Although, I have to say that I am indeed admiring ‘the view’ much more now that you’re here.”

“Ahh, keep that up. Flattery will get you far with me,” Evelyn replied with a wink. “Besides, I like a man who is quick with his tongue.” This earned him yet another, slightly more lascivious, smirk – this one sending a faint shiver down his spine.

She had him off balance and floundering. Again. He needed to regain the upper foot in the conversation. “I wasn’t expecting to see you here. We were supposed to be meeting with this guild’s leader.” He looked around searchingly. “You wouldn’t happen to know where he is, would you?”

As he watched Evelyn’s smile widen further, and their guide’s wrinkled face crease into a frown, Alexion immediately realized his mistake.

“You are looking at *her*,” Evelyn replied evenly. “I’m the proud guild leader of Cloud Shipping. Although, as you can see, we are quite busy so we’ll need to walk and talk. I expect this won’t be a long conversation, anyway.”

Without waiting for Alexion’s response, she turned to address

the older man who had escorted them. “We will be fine for now, Frederick. Stay close in case I have need of you. Have one of the air mages create a bubble so that we can speak without interruption.” The man nodded curtly and then disappeared into the crowd without a word. Then Evelyn glanced at Caerus. “Your man can wait in the lobby. I would speak with you alone.”

Not waiting for an answer, Evelyn set off through the warehouse, clearly expecting Alexion to follow. The two men shared a confused look, and Alexion simply waved Caerus off. The noble seemed a little put off by her rude tone and his abrupt dismissal, but it was better not to rock the boat here. Resolved, Alexion set off after Evelyn.

The woman set a brisk pace, weaving between the men and women filling the warehouse as she inspected their work carefully. More startling was the shimmering globe of air that formed around the trio a few seconds later. The wind didn’t seem to create a physical barrier, and Evelyn’s employees had no difficulty stepping inside. However, it dampened the noise of the warehouse to a dull roar.

Alexion did his best to overcome his shock. The woman had clearly planned this entire exchange to put him off-guard. He needed to lean back on his training. He had spent enough time watching his father to understand that you start every new conversation with small talk. As his father always said, “Rapport builds trust, and trust leads to a deal.”

“How did you come to manage this trade guild?” Alexion inquired as he watched Evelyn closely. “This seems like an odd choice for a video game.”

This earned him a glance and a raised eyebrow as the woman reviewed and signed an inventory list handed to her by one of the foremen. “I began playing this *game* out of curiosity. Although, my father’s instructions also had something to do with it. Our family wanted to understand what had fascinated George. I’m sure you are aware that your father has invested considerable resources into this VR technology and game world.”

She hesitated, her eyes scanning the warehouse. “However, after spending some time here, I’m not certain I would even call this a *game*. I don’t know how he managed it, but there is an entire world here.”

Evelyn turned back to him, meeting his gaze. “Did you know that every city has their own economy? Their own specific resources and products? Their own import and export needs? Goods and materials within the world are generally finite, except what is gained by players through quests – much of which is self-contained to the player market. A large percentage of the items sold to in-game

vendors simply disappear, perhaps to prevent inflation. However, outside of those special circumstances, this world has one of the most intricate and fully fledged trading systems I have ever seen. It is almost indistinguishable from our own.”

Evelyn abruptly returned to her rounds, walking quickly through the warehouse as Alexion struggled to keep up. “Anyway, to answer your question, I had no interest in slaying dragons. I was more curious about the inner workings of the NPCs and this world. That naturally led me to the trade guilds here in Barrow. I quickly found they were rather antiquated. I’m sure you are aware of our family’s distribution business?”

Indeed, Alexion was. Most of the St. Clair wealth had been built upon a transportation empire. If Alex’s family specialized in building products, Evelyn’s family focused on delivering them. Their relationship had always been an uneasy one of grudging symbiosis. “So, you decided to create your own guild?” Alexion murmured, his brow furrowed in thought. “How...”

“How did I build something this large this quickly?” Evelyn asked with a tinkling laugh. “Simple. Can you believe they were still using wagons to transport goods overland? Wagons! In a world of magic, they were still using beast-powered transport. There’s a long story there, but I will spare you.

“Let us just say that I stumbled upon one of these dilapidated beauties,” she continued, patting the ship beside her. “After that, it only took a bit of my own seed capital, a low-cut dress, and a demonstration of how much more efficient a *flying* cargo ship could be to convince a few other NPC investors to join in the enterprise.”

She glanced at Alexion as she continued her brisk march, a shark-like smile on her face. “In short, we took on some angel investors.” Her grin widened as her eyes flicked to Alexion’s golden wings, clearly appreciating her own wordplay. “And now we are primed to deliver to four major cities on this continent, with plans to expand into four more within the next two months. We’ve also grown to a fleet of five airships now, with many more under construction.”

She abruptly stopped and turned to meet Alexion’s gaze firmly. “Power is not a function of brute strength or zealous devotion. Just like in the real world, *wealth* is power. When I control this world’s trade and distribution, it won’t matter if you are an angel of light or death himself. You will still have to deal with me.”

Alexion was a bit flustered by her explanation and tone. He hadn’t really thought beyond conquering a city or his revenge on Jason. In contrast, Evelyn had approached the game with logical precision and a cunningness he found alluring – and somewhat terrifying. The mixture was intoxicating, and the insidious voice in the

back of his mind could only weakly question how many other people had discovered opportunities like the one that Evelyn had snatched.

He cleared his throat. "That is an ambitious plan. Perhaps we would be a good..."

"I know you are here to discuss a trade agreement," Evelyn interrupted him. "We were your last stop, after all, so we've had plenty of warning regarding your intentions. The answer is no."

A frown tugged at the corner of Alexion's mouth, and he could feel the voice in the back of his mind whispering that she had set up this meeting to embarrass him. He forced himself to remain civil, his smile never faltering. "You haven't even heard our proposition, and you are already turning us down? Why even take the meeting?"

"Curiosity," Evelyn answered with a dismissive wave of her hand. Another foreman started to approach, and she gestured at him to wait. "I wanted to see what I was dealing with. I had heard stories of the Great Alexion, although, I was expecting something a little... greater. I can see that you barely understand this world."

"I think that's uncharitable. I have made a great deal of progress," Alexion replied quickly, irritation coloring his voice at her slight. "I have conquered an entire city, after all."

Evelyn nodded. "In part. I even hear your emerging theocracy has done wonders to curb the remaining dissenters – or should I call them *heretics* now? In any event, that doesn't solve your underlying problem, does it? As part of conquering that city, you killed half the population, destroyed most of the commerce inside the city, and completely destabilized its economy. Now you don't have the means to equip your own troops, much less entice new NPCs and players for any length of time. In short, your situation is nearly as bad as the Twilight Throne."

"We have increased tax revenue dramatically. We are far from broke," Alexion replied, hedging slightly. In fact, even with their new taxes, they were barely making ends meet. He had been forced to pay his guildmates to manage the leveling areas around the city, and it was impractical to equip his soldiers using the player market. Evelyn was right that his city had almost no local economy at this point.

"The ploy of charging new players to use leveling areas was a good idea, but it's only a short-term fix," Evelyn continued, watching Alexion. "The reason that the other guilds wouldn't deal with you is simple. You don't have anything to trade. You are able to lean on your father's connections in the real world, and you have clearly failed to take his lessons to heart. Here you are forced to start fresh. You are a nobody."

Alexion bit down on his frustration, the voice in the back of his mind now screaming at him to be heard. How could this woman stand

here and claim that his achievements were worth nothing after everything he had done and endured? Alexion forced the voice to be silent. He had experienced firsthand the consequences of arrogance. He still shuddered at the memories of his encounter with the dark god. He couldn't deny that much of what Evelyn said rang true – even if he didn't want to admit it.

Regardless, he did have something to offer.

“Military strength,” Alexion said, raising his eyes to meet Evelyn's. “We may not have any products to trade, but we have military power in the form of the Nephilim and the Confessors. The Confessors do not need much, if any, equipment and they are extremely effective in small-scale skirmishes. The Nephilim are also the only aerial fighters in the game for now.”

Another smile appeared on Evelyn's face. “I knew you were clever. Indeed, you could offer military power. But how could I use that?”

Alexion felt like she was testing him – the knowing smirk on her face a dead giveaway. He gestured at the nearby airship. “My guess is that the air is not without its threats – native monsters that can fly and can attack from any direction. This would make these expensive-looking ships difficult to defend.”

He tilted his head to the side. “And native monsters aren't your only concern, are they? After meeting with some of your fellow guild leaders, I expect that they may not take kindly to an upstart putting them out of business. You need to be concerned about sabotage – both on land and in the air.”

This earned him a pleased laugh from Evelyn, and he found himself concerned with how much he enjoyed the sound. He shook off that thought immediately as she addressed him again, “You're not far off! I do have need for aerial fighters to accompany my ships. That contract work would be somewhat lucrative and gain your fighters some much-needed experience.”

“I sense a ‘but’ coming,” Alexion said with an arched eyebrow.

“Indeed. Bodyguards are well and good. I want something more valuable.” A mischievous glint flashed in her eyes. “There are certain products that I can only secure with the use of brute force. I also expect that you may find our interests align here.”

Evelyn leaned forward hungrily, sunlight streaming down through the roof of the building and gleaming off her hair. She almost looked like an earnest angel as she asked, “What do you know about the market for undead slaves?”

Chapter 7 - Optimistic

Jason stepped off the last step and into the pitch-dark room. As the keep recognized his presence, blue torches sprung to life around the square enclosure. The flickering light revealed a squat rectangular pedestal positioned in the center of the room with a large bowl sitting on its surface. As Jason approached, he could make out the black substance that rested inside, the liquid mana seeming to absorb the faint light cast throughout the room.

He was hoping that it would be easier for him to summon the Old Man here. The god had promised him new spells and abilities in exchange for completing his evolution quest. However, he hadn't yet delivered on that promise. Jason planned to hold the dark god to his agreement. He wasn't certain what else he could do. He clearly wasn't capable of facing Thorn in his current state, and Morgan had already made it clear that he had surpassed her ability to train him.

Frustrated, Jason focused his attention on the mana well. As he stared at the ebony liquid, brief flashes of memory appeared in his mind's eye. Slitting Riley and Frank's wrists. Tentacles of darkness crawling up his skin and piercing his eyes. His encounter with Rex and the other souls of the Kin that resided in the well. The memories of his friends – their pain and trauma.

He winced as he remembered Riley's memory in particular, including his poor attempt to confront her about whether the scene with her grandfather had been real. He had been so stupid. Even now, he could see her tear-streaked cheeks. His attempt to console her. The feeling of his arm around her shoulders. The brief pause as they leaned toward each other as their eyes met shyly.

Despite his nonchalance with Frank, he *had* thought they had been about to kiss. He had been looking forward to seeing Riley again. But there was a stark difference between his daydreams and the awkward reality. How did he broach the subject again? And then there were the insidious doubts. Did she regret what had almost happened? Maybe he had just made it up in his head – tricked himself into thinking she was interested in him.

Just the thought made his heart lurch painfully.

He shook his head to try to clear it. His relationship with Riley aside, they needed to move quickly to secure the city and grow stronger. Jason turned his attention back to the pedestal, recalling what the Old Man had told him about how the well granted him access to other powers. If the dark god wasn't going to deliver on his

promises, then the well might offer an alternate way to grow stronger. The problem was that he had no idea how to access its powers. The obelisk at the top of the keep and the gate had both responded to touch, so maybe the well worked the same way?

Jason tentatively reached toward the obsidian mana lingering within the bowl, the small gesture requiring more willpower than he had expected. His last few encounters with the liquid mana hadn't exactly been pleasant. He eased his hand forward, ready to jerk it back or dive to the side at a moment's notice.

Yet, as Jason's fingers touched the surface and sank beneath the inky black substance, the liquid remained placid. The energy felt cool on his skin, leaving a tingling sensation. A blue menu screen appeared in the air before him, his eyes widening in surprise. He had expected something catastrophic. Eye-melting pain. Another one-way trip to the moonlit cave. This was a little... mundane.

Am I really upset that the game didn't try to kill me? Maybe Gloria was right, he thought with mild amusement. Perhaps the game really had been messing with him.

He quickly scanned the menus and saw that the well offered pre-set options that could potentially provide bonuses to the city and its residents. For example, there was one category labeled "Miracles" that included abilities such as creating a cloud of temporary darkness. This didn't seem terribly useful within the radius of the Twilight Throne, but it might come in handy if he ever ventured outside the city again – assuming, of course, that he could find some way to access the well remotely.

One category, in particular, caught his attention as he was scrolling through the menu. It was labeled "Structures." Jason tapped the option, and the menu shifted to a list of available build options. Strangely, only a single structure was listed. The remainder of the list was grayed out – implying that there were other structures that he could build eventually. Maybe he just hadn't advanced enough to use this feature?

With a mental shrug, Jason tapped the icon for the first building on the list, and a new prompt appeared before him.

Mana Well Console: Build Options

Structure: Dark Spire

Description: This building can be formed anywhere inside the Twilight Throne's radius of influence. The tower acts as an extension of the dark keep, expanding the territory's aura of darkness in a

larger radius. Further upgrades provide additional benefits.

Cost: 5 Spirit Charges

The prompt certainly raised a few questions.

First, Jason didn't see any obvious way to upgrade the building – although he assumed that he needed to build the spire before it could be upgraded. That was a little troubling since he was basically gambling on whether the Dark Spire would be useful. Simply increasing the radius of the zone's eternal darkness was a minor benefit at the moment. What he desperately needed was a way to cast spells remotely – like *Undead Devotion*. That way, Frank and Vera wouldn't need to haul corpses back to the city as they conquered the outlying villages. This would also greatly simplify William's "population mine" in Peccavi.

Next, Jason's gaze flitted to the cost of the building, noting that the well's resources were represented as "Spirit Charges." However, that didn't exactly tell him how many of these charges he had available. Were five charges a little or a lot? He quickly flipped back through the menus until he was at the original screen. Sure enough, there was an option labeled "Well Status."

He tapped the icon, and another screen appeared in the air before him.

Mana Well Console: Status

Description: The well holds liquid dark mana that can be used to aid the city and its residents. The available mana (or Spirit Charges) is limited, however, and there are two methods to accumulate additional power: actions taken by citizens of the Twilight Throne that are consistent with their desires, and deaths that occur within the city's radius of influence or kills made by its citizens. Both will increase the Spirit Charges held by the well. The mana well can also be upgraded and expanded to increase its storage capacity and the efficiency with which it collects spirit charges.

Well Level: 1 (15% to level 2)

Current Spirit Charges: 12/100

Spirit Charge Income: +1 every two days (average).

It doesn't seem like I have very many Spirit Charges right now, he thought to himself.

Jason couldn't help but recall the various events where the Old Man had intervened to help him. For example, after the townspeople of Peccavi had chosen to sacrifice themselves or when he had slain the slaves aboard the Marietta on the way to the Hippie's temple. Had the god been using the power of the well? That might explain why he only had twelve charges. If so, then that seemed to indicate that the god could use the Spirit Charges at will. Jason grimaced as he realized that the Old Man had likely been spending his hard-won resources. Although, on second thought, he supposed he would have made many of the same choices.

Perhaps more importantly, what could Jason do to increase his Spirit Charge income and capacity? It was clear that the well was capable of leveling and seemed to have already accumulated some experience. However, it wasn't clear from the description how he could level the well intentionally. And he didn't see many useful options yet to spend the Spirit Charges. Despite these problems, he suspected that the well would quickly become important once he figured out how to use it.

Jason had been so caught up in his inspection of the well, that he hadn't noticed the dark figure behind him until a hesitant cough echoed through the stone room. He whirled, his hand gripping his staff defensively as his other began to twine through the motions of a curse. His movements stilled as he caught sight of Riley standing at the bottom of the nearby stairwell. She was dressed in her familiar black and red leather armor with her cowl pushed back to reveal her blonde hair.

"S-sorry," Jason said, relaxing his stance, although his heart was still beating rapidly. This was the first time he had been alone with Riley since the bubble tea shop. "I guess I'm just a little on edge after the run-in with Thorn."

"I can understand that," Riley replied quietly. She moved toward him with hesitant steps, not quite meeting his gaze.

"Uh, so what's up?" Jason asked, kicking himself for how stupid the question sounded as it left his lips. What he really wanted to do was ask her to dinner or bring up their almost-kiss, but just the thought made him queasy. Plus, standing beside the mana well where he had slit her wrists didn't exactly seem like the right place. At least that's what he kept telling himself. "Weren't you supposed to be helping Jerry?"

Riley frowned slightly. "He insisted he didn't need my help – something about my *good nature* spoiling his fun. I think he might be overestimating me," she offered with the hint of a smile.

Jason returned her smile, although he was a bit puzzled by her explanation. At the meeting, the innkeeper had seemed enamored with the idea of having her as a teammate. "Well, Jerry is certainly competent. I trust he'll manage on his own," he answered noncommittally.

Riley nodded in agreement. "What are you doing down here anyway? I had to get Pint to tell me where you went after your cryptic comment at the meeting."

"I was hoping that the Old Man would be here," Jason replied with a grimace. "He promised to teach me new spells after we returned with the grimoire and completed the evolution quest." He gestured at the room. "Although, he doesn't seem to be in any hurry to show up."

Riley nodded in understanding, and the pair lapsed into an awkward silence. She bit her lip, looking distinctly uncomfortable – like she wanted to say something, but wasn't sure how. Jason's stomach was doing summersaults, and he fumbled with his staff as he moved, nearly dropping it. Sometimes the game was just too realistic. The irony of this situation also wasn't lost on him. He could destroy a city and face a dragon, but he couldn't talk to Riley?

Mustering what little courage he had, Jason decided to break the silence. "About the other day," he began tentatively. "At the bubble tea place, I mean. I'm sorry about confronting you about the memory of your grandfather. I really wasn't certain if it was real, and I didn't know how to check aside from talking with you. I never meant to hurt you." Jason had begun to babble, and he forced himself to shut up before he said something stupid. Well, something *more* stupid than the jumbled nonsense that had just spilled out of his mouth.

"I-it's okay," Riley said, still not quite looking at him as she stood beside the lip of the well. "I probably overreacted a little. I guess I was just surprised. That was a lot to process at once, and that's not a memory that I like to focus on." Her fingers traced the edge of the bowl, and she glanced at Jason out of the corner of her eye.

Now was the really painful part. How did she feel about their almost-kiss? Had he taken advantage of her? Was that why she had been a little distant? Was it something about Alex? His stomach had finished its warm-up and was now going through a full-fledged gymnastics routine as he thought about how to word his next question.

Riley saved him from another fumbling attempt.

"About what happened after our talk – or almost happened..."

Her gaze had drifted down the mana well, an odd expression on her face that he couldn't identify.

Jason felt a hollow feeling wash over him as he watched her reaction. She must regret what they had almost done. That look spoke volumes. "It's okay," he blurted quickly. "I shouldn't have done anything. It's really not a big deal."

Riley glanced up at him in surprise, her brow furrowed in confusion. A strange mixture of emotions flitted across her face. Then her expression hardened. "I guess not," she said quietly. Her gaze shifted back to the well, and an awkward silence descended upon them once again.

Jason couldn't help but stare at her, his mind awash in uncertainty. He felt like he had messed up somehow. Was she upset with him? He hadn't meant to take advantage of her – especially not with her history with Alex. Still, he desperately wanted to hug her and tell her that it hadn't been a mistake – that he had been thinking about it for days. He reached toward her hand where it rested on the lip of the bowl. While his hand was still hovering in the air, a voice spoke from behind them.

"Am I interrupting something?"

The pair both flinched, and Jason's arm retreated to his side. He whirled for a second time, a glare lighting his eyes as he stared at the Old Man. The dark god stood nearby, his face shadowed by the cowl of his hood. Although, Jason felt like he could detect a faint smirk. Of course, he would pick this moment to appear! He felt like the dark god had chosen this entrance intentionally.

"No, no you weren't," Jason answered quickly. Since she was standing slightly behind him, Jason missed the way Riley flinched at his words.

The god's lips twitched slightly in response, the only indication that he had noticed the tension between the pair. Then his hooded face turned toward Riley. "Hello, little sister. It is nice to finally meet you in person."

"The two of you have met – or spoken?" Jason asked, surprised. As far as he knew, the dark god had only ever appeared to him.

"Sort of," Riley replied in a quiet voice, her eyes focused on the Old Man and her fists clenching. "You could say that he *helped* me in Vaerwald when I was pursuing the quest for my bow. Or you could say that he branded me as his disciple and painted his name on the side of their Great Library – which almost resulted in our group getting imprisoned," she added sourly.

The Old Man spread his hands wide in a conciliatory gesture. "And yet here you stand. Alive and well. And I believe you accomplished your objective, no? So why quibble about the means?"

Jason didn't love the god's tone. He was intimately familiar with the Old Man's machinations, and he could only imagine what he had put Riley through. However, another question was poking at the edges of his mind – demanding attention. “Should you be showing yourself to other travelers? Doesn't that violate your rules?” he asked in confusion.

“We are not technically required to avoid contact with the other travelers,” the god explained as he paced around the well to face them both. “However, having more than one avatar is prohibited. Consequently, we tend to avoid such interactions for fear that our siblings might claim we are violating the covenants. Such accusations are easy to make and often difficult to refute.”

“What about the Hippie?” Riley asked, curiosity lacing her voice. “He didn't seem too shy around us. In fact, he was a pain in the ass.” Jason was happy to see that she was regaining some of her spirit, although she still wouldn't look at him.

The god's lips dipped into a frown. “My brother can be a bit... eccentric. Although, I suspect he felt the risk of being accused of violating the covenants was reasonably low given that Jason is already my avatar and his friends are bound to his service.”

“Bound to his service?” Riley asked, an edge to her voice. “What exactly does that mean?”

The Old Man cocked his head. “I forget that you come from an age where none of this information is readily available. You and the other traveler Frank are bound to Jason – this was part of the ritual that allowed him to become a Shade. You are now his Soul Guard.”

The god could still see the confusion written on their faces, and so he continued, “This was once an honored position. The Soul Guard served as bodyguards and companions to the Keeper. The ritual is just the beginning. As the bond grows, so will your strength. In the height of the Twilight Throne's power, several of the Soul Guard became nearly as exalted as the Keepers themselves.”

Jason glanced at Riley, his mind focusing on the word “bond.” What exactly had that ritual done to them? And the god had been clear that this connection would grow over time. What did that mean? He gritted his teeth, trying to tamp down on his frustration. The Old Man was notorious for leading him down one rabbit hole after another – chasing an endless series of questions but finding no answers. He suspected the god did this to deliberately distract him. What topic was he trying to avoid this time?

“Let's get back on track,” Jason said, cutting off Riley before she could ask any more questions. This earned him a glare, but he supposed she was at least looking at him now. “What about the new spells you promised to teach me?”

The Old Man's lips curled upward ever-so-slightly. "Oh, did I promise to teach you new spells? Or did I merely say that the evolution would *allow* you to learn new spells."

Jason stared at the god, his fists clenching. Was the Old Man messing with him right now or was he really trying to wiggle out of their bargain with clever wordplay?

Before he could demand an answer, the god let out a rumbling chuckle. "No need to look so upset, boy. I will clarify. I cannot directly teach you new spells in the way you have learned them previously. However, I can provide you with the tools you need to gain new abilities."

"Why can't you teach me?" Jason asked. The way Morgan had simply given him the memories of the requisite hand gestures and incantations had been straightforward. It often only took one or two tries for his body to pick up the movements – after which they became second nature.

"In short, it is because you have reached your memorization limit," the Old Man said tersely. "And Riley is not far behind."

Jason let out an exasperated sigh. The Hippy was a pain, but the Old Man could sometimes be equally infuriating. "Memorization limit?"

"You really have wandered off the beaten path if this is coming as a surprise," the Old Man grumbled. "This is explained to most travelers during their initiation to this world. Although, perhaps I bear partial responsibility for that."

He paused a moment before continuing, "Each person in this world has a fixed memorization limit. Generally, a language and up to six spells. This is intended to preserve the health of the individual's mind. The transfer process is demanding and can sometimes result in irreparable damage. And, before you ask, there is the occasional special exception in the case of an avatar. Your use of *Undead Devotion*, for example.

"Typically, members of a traditional mage guild use these memorizations sparingly. A larger time investment to learn spells early on can make it much easier to learn higher-level spells and skills," the god continued. "You will find that many mages hoard these memorizations like a dragon with its gold."

"And you didn't bother to mention this sooner?" Jason demanded, his voice tinged with frustration. He was already kicking himself for having wasted yet another resource. Between this and the mana well, he was starting to think that he and the dark god needed to have a serious conversation.

However, he couldn't change what had already been done, and Jason felt like the god was telling the truth, although the cynic in him

suspected that the reason for the limit was more practical – likely to prevent harm to the players. He would have to remember to speak to Alfred to confirm whether this was correct. If so, then it meant the AI had been taking more risks with the players than Jason had realized.

“It didn’t seem important at the time,” the Old Man answered. “There were more pressing issues. Or should I have explained this while you were standing waist-deep in water and your ship was sinking? Or perhaps just before you entered a foreign dungeon?”

“Fine, I get the point,” Jason interjected. “So then how does a person learn new spells once they hit the limit?”

“Like they learn anything else,” the Old Man said, a condescending smile lingering on his lips. “They train – study, repetition, and practice. Did you think that the former Keepers rose to power by being handed every skill and ability? They *mastered* their spells. There really is no true substitute for training and learning on your own.”

The god’s smile widened. “Luckily, we just so happen to be standing next to one of the Keepers’ training halls.”

The god waved at a portion of the bare, stone wall beside the mana well. For a moment, nothing happened. But then the bricks began to shudder – dust showering the room – before the wall slid back. As the debris cleared, Jason could see that a room rested on the other side. Without waiting for an invitation, he started forward.

A massive chamber rested on the other side of the wall. The space had been partitioned into four sections. In one corner there was a rack of weapons of all shapes and sizes, the metal blades gleaming in the drab light cast by the torches. Adjacent to the weapon area was a training space, replete with intricate wooden dummies that would have put Jerry’s facilities to shame.

On the other side of the chamber was a miniature library. Shelves had been carefully erected in neat rows and then packed with dusty scrolls and tomes. A long table and reading area had been set up in the final space – presumably to provide somewhere to study the contents of the library. Morgan would probably have a field day with these tomes.

“What is this?” Riley asked. Jason turned to find her standing against the far wall across from the entrance to the training area. A large door had been erected between the library and the training room sections. The doorway appeared to be constructed of a crystal-like obsidian substance, skulls and tortured faces carved into the frame. It practically screamed, “Don’t open me!”

“The entrance to the challenge rooms,” the Old Man answered simply. Jason hadn’t seen him move, but he was suddenly standing beside Riley, a wrinkled hand tracing the rim of the doorway.

“Centuries ago, new shades would enter this training chamber with their Soul Guards – spending months in careful study. Then they would brave the challenges together.” His tone almost sounded wistful as he recalled ancient memories.

“And now? Do the challenges still work?” Jason asked.

The Old Man turned to look at him. “Indeed. Unfortunately, unlike your predecessors, we do not have the luxury of time.” He glanced at Riley. “And you are down a soul guard. While your experience and the progress you have made so far is unusual for a new Keeper, I expect you will still find the challenges quite difficult.”

Sighing heavily, the dark god continued, “Normally, I would leave you to learn and explore these rooms and the challenges on your own. However, the Order has disrupted this process. They have moved much faster than I anticipated, so I am permitted to give you a brief explanation. The challenges consist of three rooms. Each one will teach skills unique to the Keepers. You will need to pass all three rooms if you are to stand any chance against Thorn.”

The god’s explanation only raised more questions. “Speaking of Thorn...” Jason began.

“We do not have time,” the Old Man barked. “I have already told you more than I probably should. You know the rules, boy.” He met Jason’s gaze and held it. “You need to move as quickly as you can. Thorn is not to be underestimated, and he will not wait long. The fate of the Kin rests on your shoulders.”

With that final warning, the god vanished, leaving a floating blue prompt in his wake.

New Quest: Keeper Challenges

The dark god has explained that to gain new spells, you will need to utilize more mundane training. Well, as *mundane* as going through a series of unknown challenges constructed by a race of ancient Necromancers can be. Unfortunately, you are also racing against the clock, and you will be attempting the challenges without adequate training and without Frank – your other Soul Guard. So, this shouldn’t be difficult at all...

Difficulty: A

Success: Complete each of the three challenges.

Status: 0/3 challenges completed.

Failure: Unknown.

Reward: Acquire new abilities and spells.

Jason frowned in frustration as he reviewed the prompt. Of course, the Old Man hadn't answered any of his questions. Who was Thorn? What was the Order? What was this *gate* that Thorn had alluded to? It felt like the dark god only gave him teasing glimpses – just enough to allow Jason to get by and start to trace the outline of the conflict between the gods and mortals but without actually answering any real questions.

His eyes fixed on the obsidian door beside Riley. He had no idea what he would discover inside, but he didn't have any choice but to stumble in blindly – to constantly strain for the carrot of power that the dark god seemed to forever dangle in front of him. As always, he could keep moving forward, or admit defeat and slink back into obscurity.

His gaze shifted to Riley, her brow furrowed slightly in concentration as she studied the door. Her fingers curled an errant strand of hair absently. The gesture felt familiar – conjuring memories of dull, lengthy classes at Richmond. Despite the problems mounting in-game and out, his thoughts kept returning to Riley. He didn't know where their conversation had gone wrong, and he was faced with a different set of unanswered questions.

Between Thorn, the Dark God, and his... well, whatever it was that lingered between him and Riley, the mysteries just kept piling up, leaving him with the feeling that he was advancing blindly.

At least Jason had become accustomed to working in the dark.

Chapter 8 - Persuasive

“What now?” Riley asked, her hand resting on the dark door and her fingers tracing the intricate scrollwork that worked its way up the frame. He could see arcane patterns in the material, but he couldn’t make out their meaning.

“I don’t know,” Jason replied slowly, approaching the door until he stood beside her. “I suppose we should investigate the training rooms more carefully as a first step. Maybe they’ll contain something that helps with the challenges.”

He wasn’t certain how he had upset her before the Old Man interrupted, but things were clearly tense between the two of them. That was a distraction that could make these challenges even more difficult. However, acknowledging the problem didn’t give him any insight into how to fix it. Talking about the bubble tea shop hadn’t helped and even thinking back over the conversation still made him queasy. He wasn’t anxious to repeat the experience.

Yet, this was *Riley*. This was the girl who had saved him countless times already – who had his back. Even now, he couldn’t help himself from admiring the way her armor hugged her figure or her confident, lithe movements as she inspected the door leading into the challenges.

She turned suddenly, and Jason shifted his gaze away from her, acting as though he had been inspecting the nearby library. “What do you think?” she asked.

“I’m sorry, I missed your last question,” Jason said, fumbling slightly. He must have zoned out there for a moment.

Riley dropped her eyes to the ground. “Maybe I should go see if I can convince Jerry to let me help him while you explore the training rooms and the first challenge. We should probably have at least one of us watching the city with the Order still at large,” she offered, her voice hesitant.

It felt like she had punched him in the stomach. Did she really want to get away from him? Was she upset? Why?

Before he could think about his response, the words were already leaving his lips. “I think you should stay.”

Riley glanced up at him sharply, a look of confusion flashing across her face. “Are you sure?”

“Yes,” he replied more firmly. “I-I will need your help with the trials. You heard the Old Man. Just the training for these challenges usually took months even with both soul guards. I doubt I can do this

alone.”

He could have sworn he saw a flash of irritation sweep across her face before she turned away from him. *Okay, yeah. She's definitely upset. But why? Did I do something?* he wondered. Did she just not want to be around him? How had they gone from almost kissing to this?

“You’re right,” Riley said, her voice sounding strained. “Then we shouldn’t waste any time. We need to make certain *you* pass these trials quickly.” With that, she yanked open the door, the massive portal opening smoothly despite its size and weight. Without any further warning, Riley stepped inside – not sparing a look behind her to see if Jason followed.

Jason stood in shock for a moment, watching her form retreat into the darkness on the other side of the doorway. He managed to shake himself out of his stupor as the door began to close, and he hurriedly rushed to enter the room. As he entered, a dull thump resounded behind him – signaling that the portal had closed. He turned and rested a hand on the door, which caused a blue notification to appear in the air in front of him.

System Notice

This portal is now closed. It cannot be re-opened until the challenge has been completed or all entrants have been slain.

Damn it, Jason thought to himself.

Blue flames suddenly sparked into existence, illuminating a massive new room nearly the size of a football field. It was roughly rectangular, dark crystal forming jagged columns at uneven intervals throughout the enclosure, but what captured Jason’s attention were the towering ivory piles of bones strewn about the room. The mountains appeared much larger toward the corners of the room and nearly reached to the ceiling. The whole scene was painted in a pale sapphire light, and an almost palpable silence hung in the air, lending the room a somber, macabre feeling.

“Hey, you could have given me some warning,” Jason snapped, whirling toward Riley.

She met his expression evenly, sparks of irritation dancing in her eyes. “As the Old Man said, we don’t have much time. And, we need to find out what we’re facing.” She turned away from him to survey the room. “Or are you concerned you won’t be able to keep up?” she asked, her question lingering in the air – challenging.

Frustration surged through Jason's veins, both at how Riley had started the challenge and how she had implied that he wasn't up to the task. Although, he had to acknowledge that her words stung, striking a bit too close to the truth. He had been nearly useless in the battle with Thorn and during the parts of the Hippy's dungeon where he was limited to melee. Would he be any more helpful here?

There was no point in fighting with Riley. Getting angry wouldn't help – not when they needed to try to work together. Jason summoned his dark mana, cool energy pushing back at the hot irritation that pulsed in his chest, and his thoughts calmed.

"Fine. You've already made the decision for us. I guess we'll have to make the best of it." His voice was cold under the effects of his mana.

Another hurt look flashed across Riley's face, but she held her tongue.

Jason's gaze swept across the room, finally coming to rest on a stout pillar standing in the center of the room. He approached it cautiously, keeping a firm grip on the staff in his hand. As he neared, he noticed that a spherical crystal had been affixed to the top of the column, a cloudy gray substance floating within its depths.

"Get ready, I'm not sure if this will start the challenge," Jason warned. He didn't bother to glance at Riley to see if she had followed his instructions.

He placed his palm against the surface of the crystal and voices suddenly sounded through the room. The sound was odd, as though multiple people were whispering the same message at the same time, causing the words to reverberate and echo through the room. At the same time, they didn't really seem to be speaking. Even covering his ears, Jason could make out the buzzing murmur. Which only raised more questions...

Challenge 1: A Trial of Bone has been initiated.

We have detected that this is the challengers' first attempt.

Challenge aborted.

An instructor shall be provided shortly.

“An instructor?” Riley asked.

Her question was soon answered as the air beside the column shimmered and rippled, inky black mist appearing and swirling with growing strength until a miniature tornado whipped through the room. And then, in a flash, it was gone, and a ghostly, translucent individual now stood beside the pillar.

“Hey, boy,” Rex said, his familiar skeletal form unmistakable.

“Rex!” Jason shouted, rushing forward to greet the former general. His hand passed through his body, leaving tendrils of mist in its wake.

“Hmm, I seem to be a bit transparent,” Rex observed, glancing down at his body. “First, I lose the family jewels, and now I’m some sort of ghost! At this rate, I’ll just probably be a floating pair of eyeballs that can’t talk next. My situation only worsens each time we meet.” The former general’s skeletal jaw clacked as he chuckled at his own joke, and Jason couldn’t help but smile.

Then Rex caught sight of Riley standing behind Jason. “Ahh, hello again, girl. How are you?”

“Fine,” Riley answered tersely, glancing briefly at Jason in irritation.

A frown warped Rex’s features. He seemed to do a double take, looking back and forth between Jason and Riley, noting their tense posture and expressions. “Clearly,” he observed in a dry tone.

Jason didn’t want to go back over however he had managed to screw things up with Riley. He tried to change the topic quickly. “So how are you here? The voices said they were sending an instructor...”

The dark orbs of energy that made up Rex’s eyes looked distracted for a moment, as though he was staring off into space. “The last thing I remember, I was floating in what felt like an ocean. It was strange. I could sense people around me. Conversations, feelings, emotions. It felt real, but at the same time, it almost felt like a dream...”

He cocked his head slightly. “And then there was this tugging sensation, and these voices explained that I was supposed to be your instructor.” Rex regained focus suddenly, his gaze turning back to Jason. “Ahh. Yes. I’m supposed to train you to help you complete the challenges.”

“Uh, what exactly are you going to teach me?” Jason asked.

Rex grinned, the expression on his bony face. “How to use the spells and abilities of a Keeper, of course! You’re going to love this first one.” He gestured at the room. “The first challenge is about defense.”

He hesitated suddenly, grimacing as he presumably listened to the voices. “So, do you want the good news or the bad news first?”

“Bad news,” Jason said immediately.

“You will not be able to summon any creatures during these challenges, and those abilities will be disabled,” Rex said, his expression serious. “Also, you won’t gain any experience for the creatures you slay during these challenges, but you can improve your skills.”

Shit, he thought. That meant he had to rely on his terrible stats and melee skills. He glanced at Riley to see an amused look painted on her face. She’d been right. She was going to have to carry him through this.

“Okay,” Jason replied through gritted teeth. “The good news better be awesome.”

“I get to teach you a new spell before you start! Actually, you will get to learn a new spell before each challenge,” Rex explained. “This first one is called *Bone Armor*.”

Before Jason could respond, the skeletal general waved a hand, and a dark apparition appeared beside him. The specter was faceless but seemed to be about Jason’s size, and it was also wielding a staff. As Jason watched, the creature’s free hand danced through a series of gestures and arcane words spilled from its throat. Black panels of bone sprouted from its body, covering it from head to foot in plate-like armor. It certainly looked imposing.

“Pretty damn cool, huh?” Rex asked with a grin.

Jason could only nod in agreement. “Yeah, but can you do it again? I didn’t catch the hand gestures or the incantation.”

“Certainly, boy,” Rex agreed. “That’s what I’m here for.”

Jason watched the specter closely as it repeated the spell, trying to mimic the hand movements and the words as best he could. He quickly lost track of time as he tried to emulate the motions.

After several tries, he realized that it was impossible to learn both the chant and the gestures simultaneously. So, he switched tactics – forcing the specter to repeat the motions of the spell and focusing on the gestures one at a time until he had mastered them. Only then did he move on to the incantation. The process was painful and time-consuming compared to the way he had previously learned spells, but he found that it became easier over time. He discovered that his hands seemed to know some of the gestures, likely having developed muscle memory from his previous spells, even if he had never learned what the patterns meant.

When he started memorizing the incantation, he encountered something strange. If he really concentrated, he realized that he could understand some of the words of the spell, although the meaning of the entire spell still eluded him. He assumed he had never really paid attention to this before since the incantations for his other spells had

simply been planted in his brain. He had just thought he was spouting magical gibberish, but perhaps there was something more at work here.

The entire process was disconcerting. Jason couldn't help but recall his last conversation with Alfred. The AI had explained that he had created a living world in AO and had simply used the game mechanics to ease the players into it. For the first time, Jason was starting to see what Alfred meant. There seemed to be much more to the game's magic system than what he had considered at first glance. Which inevitably led him to the next question; what more was there to discover?

Nearly an hour later, he felt ready to try casting the spell. By this point, Riley had inspected the entire room, finding nothing more than bones lingering in the corners. She was now sitting atop one of the piles, watching him with a bored expression.

"Okay, let's give this a shot," Jason murmured.

"Finally!" Rex exclaimed, hopping back to his feet. Even he had grown tired of watching Jason mutter to himself as his fingers twitched.

Jason summoned his dark mana the way he did for his other spells, the chill energy surging through him. Then he began winding his hands slowly through the gestures of the spell – as arcane words slipped from his lips. The dark specter mirrored his actions as it walked through the same steps. As Jason completed the spell, he waited expectantly...

But nothing happened.

He glanced at the specter in confusion, mentally reviewing the steps of the spell in his head. His gestures and incantation hadn't been perfect, but it had been pretty damn close. "I don't get it..." he murmured.

"That was anti-climactic," Riley offered from nearby. "I'm glad to see you made progress after an hour of muttering to yourself." Jason couldn't help but glare in her direction.

Rex glanced between Jason and Riley with his head cocked to the side as though he was listening to something. "Ahh!" he suddenly exclaimed and smacked his head with his palm. Or at least he tried to. His hands just passed harmlessly through his skull, his face rippling and contorting as the mist split apart and then joined back together. "I forgot the other part of the spell." He glanced at Jason sheepishly. "Sorry. I'm new to this whole spellcasting thing.

"*Bone Armor* requires you to have sufficient materials to use the spell," Rex continued. "In this case, bones. Original, I know. It's also impractical to walk around carrying a bunch of skeletons in your bag, and it would take too long to retrieve them in order to cast *Bone*

A armor. To address this issue, the Keepers invented a way to store the materials internally. They called it *Bone Absorption*.”

Jason was eyeing Rex with a curious expression. He could already envision a number of uses for such an ability. Could he summon skeletons using the materials? That would be awesome, although it also felt a little unbalanced. That would basically shore up one of his major weaknesses, which was easy access to materials.

Rex seemed to anticipate his question. “Wipe that excited look off your face. Once the bones are absorbed, they can only be used to cast *Bone Armor*. Anyway, this ability is a bit easier to learn – at least, so I’m told by the creepy spirit voices. Simply grab a bone, summon your mana, and then visualize that you are grabbing the bone with the mana and pulling it into your body.”

Jason did as he was instructed. He picked up a single bone and summoned his dark mana – the energy raging through his veins in a frigid torrent. Then he tried to visualize the mana peeling away from his body and encircling the bone, much like he did when he was creating a new skeleton. Slowly, a tendril broke away from his skin and snatched at the bone in his hand. Then, Jason ordered it to pull the bone back into his body.

This took several tries, the bone bouncing awkwardly off his chest repeatedly. However, Jason eventually got the feel for it. The trick was to think about his body as something permeable – like the dark specter that still stood beside Rex. Finally, the bone sank into his body, and Jason was awarded with a notification.

New Spell: Bone Absorption

As a Keeper, you are able to absorb bones into your body – recalling the materials to empower specific spells and abilities. Higher-level versions of this spell may increase your storage limit, absorption rate, and can alter and modify the bones themselves.

Skill Level: Beginner Level 1

Effect: Your storage limit is currently 100 units.

Interesting, Jason thought to himself as he reviewed the spell notification. He was intrigued by how he might be able to modify the bones in the future – that had certainly been useful with his summoned skeletons. Maybe he could customize the armor based on the enemy he was fighting.

“Okay, now absorb more bones until you hit your cap and then try casting *Bone Armor* one more time,” Rex instructed, snapping Jason out of his reverie.

He did as he was told, drawing more bones into his body. By the time he hit the resource limit, Jason even felt confident enough to try absorbing two bones at once – although he quickly discovered that this was beyond his current abilities. He only managed to pelt himself with bones, much to Riley and Rex’s amusement. Once he hit the cap, he tried to cast *Bone Armor* again, his hands moving through the gestures carefully as he focused on the incantation.

As he finished the spell, Jason felt his skin begin to tingle along his forearms, back, and thighs. He looked down at his arm to see bone drifting out of his skin and through his leather armor – the material semi-transparent. Then the ivory substance settled atop his armor, bound to his body by dark mana. The meager panels certainly didn’t look like the full-plate armor he had seen on the dark specter, but it was a start.

New Spell: Bone Armor

You have learned the defensive spell of a Keeper, allowing you to robe yourself in armor made of bones. Higher levels of this spell provide greater durability, coverage, and may allow the user to manipulate the shape of the armor.

Skill Level: Beginner Level 1

Cost: 50 units.

Effect: Create simple bone armor. Each piece of armor has 100 health.

x2 Spell Rank Up: Bone Absorption

Skill Level: Beginner Level 3

Effect: Your storage limit is currently 102 units.

“Fantastic,” Rex said, his spectral form pacing around Jason and observing the plates. “Apparently, this defensive spell can become quite powerful at higher levels – assuming you have stored sufficient bones ahead of time, of course.”

“He’s learned the new spell, so now what?” Riley asked, hopping down from her perch and approaching the pair, her hands already resting on the hilt of her daggers.

Rex frowned in concentration and cocked his head once again. “Next you will need to attempt the challenge. You must conquer it to advance to the next room.” He hesitated, his frown deepening. “I’m supposed to give you some silly cryptic riddle for this first challenge, but that voodoo nonsense never appealed to me. So, I’ll just be straight with you.”

He met their gaze evenly. “The objective of this first trial is

simple. Survive.”

As soon as Rex finished speaking, he abruptly winked out of existence, his spectral dummy vanishing as well. The cloud of dark vapor drifted back into the globe, and the sphere lit up, casting an eerie blue light across the room.

Challenge 1: A Trial of Bone has been initiated.

Prepare yourselves, challengers.

Chapter 9 - Durable

Riley and Jason stood in the center of the room, weapons drawn and their eyes warily searching the nearby mounds of bones. Neither was certain what to expect from this encounter. While Rex's instructions had been somewhat clear, he had been a little vague on the details. "Survive" seemed straightforward. But for how long and against what?

Fortunately – or unfortunately – they didn't have to wait long to find out. All at once, hundreds of bones launched into the air, spiraling and colliding in a frenzy of movement. Jason and Riley inched closer to each other, trying to stay inside the eye of the maelstrom.

The ivory material collided and combined, and bands of dark mana lashed the bones together. Within only moments, nearly two dozen skeletons surrounded the pair, their glowing black eyes watching them with deadly intent. Even more disturbing was how familiar the skeletons appeared, their skulls framed by mighty horns and massive spiked shields held in-hand. Their skeletal tails swished through the air in anticipation.

"Death Knights," Jason murmured. "How...?"

He didn't get to finish his question as the skeletons charged toward them, their feet thundering across the room's floor and scattering the loose bones. Riley didn't wait for her opponents to engage. In a flurry of movement, she drew and fired her bow in rapid succession. The tips of her arrows pulsed with dark energy. Each missile struck an exposed joint or weak point, exploding violently and tearing several of the Death Knights apart while sending others toppling headfirst into the ground.

Riley's assault barely made a dent in the horde of skeletons, who continued their mad rush, their feet pounding the stone floor. As they neared, Riley sprinted for a nearby pile of bone and leaped with surprising strength, placing her atop the mound and out of the immediate reach of the Death Knights. She then proceeded to launch arrow after arrow into the pack of undead. This might have provided the archer with protection, but it also meant that Jason was now standing alone near the center of the room.

He shook himself out of his momentary shock, calling three bone shields. At least he didn't lack materials here, although his summoning abilities had been disabled. Then he tried to cast his new *Bone Armor*, wondering if it would really offer any protection against

the hulking forms of the Death Knights barreling toward him. His fingers fumbled through the new gestures, and Jason discovered that it was much more difficult to summon the armor while under pressure.

He managed to complete the spell just as one of the Death Knights made it within reach. Jason dived forward into a roll, a rush of wind signaling that the skeleton had raced past him. As he struggled to regain his feet, he heard the crunch of bone and was rewarded with the sight of two former Death Knights intertwined on the floor – the pair having collided when Jason leaped out of the way.

However, more of the creatures were still racing toward him, and he didn't have time to celebrate. He heard stomping behind him and turned, seeing that a Death Knight was only a few feet away. Before Jason could regain his feet, the creature spun and its tail lashed out at Jason, the ridged bone streaking toward his chest. Jason barely managed to get his arm up in time to protect himself, but the blow still shattered the bone armor along his forearm. Burning pain bloomed in his arm and chest, and he saw his health dip, black blood splattering the floor from the open gash in his forearm. Towering above him, the skeleton raised its axe to finish him off.

The blow never landed. A missile struck the Death Knight's elbow, a blast of dark energy shattering the limb and filling the air with ivory dust. Jason caught sight of Riley standing on the bone mound behind the Death Knight, the string of her bow still vibrating. Then she turned her attention away from Jason, her missiles targeting the other Death Knights.

I need to get out of the open, Jason thought frantically as he scrambled to his feet. *I'm going to die if I stay out here!*

He eyed the enormous crystalline columns that dotted the room. Maybe he could get near one and use it to keep the Death Knights from charging. Then he would only need to deal with them in melee. A voice in the back of his mind told him this was futile. Even if he could avoid their charge, he still had no spells that could hurt them, and he didn't really know how to use his staff. It wasn't exactly an improvement, but it was still better than dying immediately.

As he raced toward one of the nearby columns, Riley provided occasional covering fire and kept the Death Knights at bay. Even so, glancing blows caused his bone shields to explode into dusty fragments, and his body was littered with cuts and scratches by the time he made it to one of the crystalline columns, pieces of bone falling from his arms and shoulders.

He rushed around the pillar, his back pressed against it. His chest heaved as he cradled his injured arm and tried to catch his breath. This was not his element, and he didn't know how he was

going to help Riley take down the remaining undead. Before he could come up with a plan, he heard a shout of warning, followed closely by a scream of pain. Jason glanced around the pillar and froze in horror. A Night Child clung to a crystalline pillar near Riley, its tiny gray body difficult to make out against the dark substance and its razor-sharp claws embedded in her thigh.

The archer yelled in fury, her daggers appearing in her hands in an instant and tearing through the creature's arm. The next blow embedded a blade in its skull. Jason glanced at the group menu in his peripheral vision. Between constantly casting her *Void Arrow* and the surprise attack, Riley's health had dipped precariously low. He wasn't in a much better position. It would take them a while to regenerate.

Time they didn't have.

The remainder of the Death Knights had broken apart, the bones streaming away on a river of dark energy. Yet as quickly as they flew apart, the malevolent energy pulled the bones back together, forming a legion of Night Children, dozens of glittering black eyes now staring at Jason and Riley. The lithe, little creatures darted about the room, scrambling up the pile of bones that Riley stood upon and climbing the crystalline columns with ease. What was unnerving was how quietly they moved, like they were more shadow than skeleton.

Riley swatted at the creatures as they darted toward her, abandoning her daggers, and using her bow like a club – each blow knocking several of the creatures off the pile. It wasn't enough. They continued to score scratches and cuts, whittling away at her waning health despite her best efforts.

Jason tried to rush to her aid, racing across the room. He started using his bone shields more offensively, mentally ordering them to knock down the nearby small Night Children as he swung wildly with his staff. One of the creatures anticipated the strike of a *Bone Shield* and darted under the ivory circle, coming up inside Jason's guard. He instinctively raised his left arm, and the creature's claws skittered off his *Bone Armor*. Then he swung the staff around like a bat – using more raw strength than skill – and the blow blasted apart the skeleton's ribcage.

And then Jason was running again.

The Night Children had almost overwhelmed Riley as Jason neared. "Riley, jump!" he shouted. She glanced at him, her expression frantic. Then she leaped.

Jason used another *Bone Shield* to swipe at the Night Child behind her, ordering another to act as a platform for her foot, the shield exploding as she touched it – likely a product of Alfred's recent changes to the skill. Then he swept his final and third shield around in a wide arc, blocking a strike from behind him.

His lack of focus cost him as a pair of claws raked down his back, pain blossoming along his spine. And then Riley was there. She dropped the creature attacking Jason with a well-aimed blow to its head. She glanced at Jason as the remainder of the undead circled around them – a massive horde of Night Children surrounding the pair, their eyes sucking in the blue torch light like miniature blackholes. Riley and Jason shared a look then. Riley’s expression spoke volumes, hopeless despair hanging heavy in her eyes.

They were going to die soon.

* * *

In fact, Riley and Jason only lasted another 30 seconds before the undead swarmed them and their ivory claws ended their lives. Surprisingly, they found themselves standing back in the challenge room moments later – no strange blue motes of energy drifting through the air. Then the same strange voices whispered through the room.

Challenge 1: A Trial of Bone failed.

Total Time: 2 minutes and 43 seconds.

Riley Kills: 43

Jason Kills: 6

“Well that was pathetic,” Rex said, the former general’s wispy black form leaning casually against the column in the center of the room. “I wasn’t really expecting you two to beat it on the first try, but less than three minutes?” He just shook his head.

“We didn’t know what we were going to be facing,” Jason argued, with a shrug. “The next time should be easier. We can think through how we should tackle the room.”

Rex frowned at him. “Oh really? And you think that you are always going to get a chance to test out a fight first? Maybe you can just die a few times like lemmings until some miraculous plan occurs to you?” He rose and paced toward the pair, giving Jason a meaningful look. “Or did you forget that some of us who follow you

don't come back?"

Jason didn't really have a good retort for that, so he decided to keep his mouth shut and sheepishly looked away.

"Good," Rex said as he observed Jason. "At least maybe now you're ready to listen. Let's get a good look at what we're working with. We'll tackle Riley next. Go ahead and bring up your Character Status."

Jason did as he was asked, tapping through the game's menus and pulling up his Character Status window.

Character Status	
Gender:	
Class:	
Alignment:	
HP:	
MP:	
SP:	
HP/MP/SP Reg:	
M-Reg:	
S-Reg:	
Strength:	
Endurance:	
Willpower:	

Affinities	
Light:	
Water:	
Earth:	

"Good gods, boy. Did you put enough points into Willpower?" Rex demanded as he scanned down the chart.

Jason assumed the question was rhetorical, but he decided to address it anyway. "Up until now, summoning as many creatures as possible has always seemed like a priority. I've been in several large-scale engagements. I can always hide, but more numbers were what usually swayed the battle."

Rex shook his head again, his eyes still focused on the sheet as though he was able to see more information than was directly available. "I can't really argue with that. You wouldn't be here if you hadn't made that call. But hiding won't work in the long run. A leader

must lead – he can't hide in the bushes while his army marches to war. Or, as you found with Thorn, you can easily be caught off-guard and killed."

The former general sighed. "I won't sugar coat it for you, these challenges are going to be rough with your skillset and stats. We'll need to try to compensate for your weaknesses and make up for lost ground."

"By doing what?" Jason asked, curiosity lacing his voice.

"By training, boy! Did you replace your brain with marbles after I died?"

Riley chuckled at that comment and Rex whirled on her. "Oh, you think that's funny, do you? You certainly fared better than our idiot overlord over there. Nearly eight times his kills, right? Looks pretty good, doesn't it?"

"I think I did okay," Riley answered defiantly.

Rex just stared at her for a moment. "What was the first thing you did in that fight?"

"I... uh, found high ground and provided covering fire," Riley offered, but she didn't seem as confident in her response as Rex glared at her. "I mean, I'm an archer..."

"You mean you, a *Soul Guard* tasked with defending your Keeper, immediately abandoned him?" Rex demanded. "You were the superior fighter. You knew that he couldn't dodge or avoid those Death Knights, but you didn't stay to protect him."

Rex stabbed a finger at her. "And what was that nonsense when Jason was on the ground and getting attacked. You could have taken out that Death Knight at his rear instead of letting him get hit." Jason's eyes widened, and he stared at Riley in confusion. He had missed that part in the heat of battle.

Irritation flashed in Riley's eyes as she saw Jason staring at her. "I made a judgment call. It looked like he could handle it. It didn't seem like a *big deal*."

Jason winced at her word choice. Then his own anger flashed into existence. Riley was the one that had looked troubled when he brought up their almost-kiss – he had just been trying to change the subject since it looked like it was making her uncomfortable. And now she was going to throw his words back in his face?

Rex interjected before Jason could say anything. "Well, it was a shit call," he said bluntly. "The goal of this trial wasn't 'get the most kills.' It was 'survive' – that's it. And as a Soul Guard, you only have one goal. You keep him," he said, pointing at Jason, "alive for as long as you can. Nothing else matters."

"Nothing?" Riley asked with an arched eyebrow. Jason could tell she was thinking that she might have been better off solo in that

fight.

“Nothing,” Rex said firmly. “If this were a real battle, the fight would have been over when he died. All of Jason’s silly little skeletons would have gone limp, and that’s ignoring the strategic and morale implications of an army’s leader being taken out. What happens when the troops realize that Jason’s dead? Now, our line is faltering and likely to rout. Who is going to take over and lead in his absence, and how long will it take for that person to assume command?”

Rex leaned forward, his dark eyes drilling into her. “Do you understand?”

Riley lapsed into silence, her gaze shifting to the ground. She still seemed irritated, but she nodded curtly. Jason could sympathize since he had just undergone a similar browbeating. However, he still couldn’t help but mull over how Riley had let him get hit. Or how she had made a barbed comment at his expense. In a way, it felt good to see Rex call her out.

At that thought, Jason’s gaze shifted back to the former general. His skeletal frame was imposing, towering over Riley. Despite the way his ghost-like body rippled and contorted, he looked fierce. Jason always looked back fondly on his memories of Rex, but it was sometimes difficult to remember that the man had been a merciless instructor and an incredibly competent fighter in his own right.

“Okay, now that you two have gotten that nonsense out of your system, we can get to work,” Rex grumbled. “I understand that we don’t have much time.”

“I’m ready to go again,” Jason offered quietly.

This just earned him a barked laugh from the undead soldier. “Oh, no. That would be pointless. I mean we need to start some *real* training. You’re both going to go back into that other room, and you aren’t coming out until you’ve raised your *Strength*, *Dexterity*, and *Endurance* by fifty points each.”

“Fifty points?” Jason muttered in shock, and he saw his expression mirrored on Riley’s face. He had trained briefly with Jerry when he had first started playing, but that had only earned him a handful of stat points – and it hadn’t felt like the thief had gone easy on him. Far from it, actually.

“Isn’t there a limit on many stat points we can gain by training?” Riley asked in confusion.

Rex nodded. “Sort of. Extensive training will cause you to become fatigued, making it impossible to gain stats by training until the debuff wears off – usually a few hours. There’s also a hard limit where you will stop improving from training alone. But the two of you are nowhere near that point. Wonder Boy over here had one training session with Jerry, and you’ve got maybe half a dozen under your

belt? You both have plenty of room to grow.”

“So, what exactly do you want us to do?” Jason asked. He was surprised at how Rex had clarified the training system. Between this and the Old Man’s explanation of how people learned magic, Jason was starting to think that he didn’t understand the game nearly as well as he thought he did.

“I’ll work up a schedule and post it in the training room,” Rex said with a grimace. “The voices tell me that’s something I can do. You’ll be doing a mixture of ordinary endurance and weight training combined with martial weapon practice. You will need to use the manuals in the library to learn weapons stances and fighting tactics since I’m a bit transparent at the moment.”

He cocked his head as if listening to something before continuing, “There is an orb similar to the one in this challenge room near the dummies that you can use to summon me – and I can help comment and improve on your form.”

“Got it?” Rex demanded, looking at the two of them.

They both nodded, and Rex barked, “Then get to work!”

Riley and Jason turned to leave, and Rex spoke up again, “A moment, Jason.”

He turned back to Rex, Riley barely glancing in his direction before vanishing into the training area. Rex’s expression softened as he looked at Jason, the drill-sergeant demeanor vanishing. “What’s the deal, boy?”

“I-I’m not sure what you mean,” Jason replied, not quite able to meet the undead man’s gaze.

“I’m dead, not blind,” Rex answered dryly. “Something is up between you and the girl. Can’t say I’m displeased that you finally made a move – even if it seems to have blown up in your face. But you both need your heads screwed on straight. This isn’t going to be easy. The voices tell me that this process sometimes took years. Years,” he repeated. “While you might have more experience than the typical novice Keeper, this is still going to be rough. I can assure you it doesn’t get easier from here.”

“It’s...well...” Jason began, trying to figure out how to explain the situation and coming up empty. He let out a sigh. “Let’s just say a lot happened after you died.”

Rex didn’t say anything immediately, just staring at Jason. “Fine. It’s not really my business and you don’t have to tell me. As your instructor, however, I’m telling you to work it out. You can fight with your girlfriend, but you need your brothers – or sisters – in arms to have your back. There can’t be any hesitation.

“Plus, that girl over there is about a mile ahead of you in terms of raw combat ability. I doubt you will ever really catch up.” He

looked at Jason, his expression sober. “You will need her to make it through the challenges.”

“I’ve got it,” Jason said, Rex’s words stinging his already wounded pride despite the truth he sensed there. Unfortunately, he had no idea of how to resolve things between himself and Riley. He wasn’t even sure how they had gotten to this point. A voice in the back of his mind provided an answer – one that he didn’t really like. *Because you’re an idiot*, it whispered. He decided abruptly that the voice didn’t know what the hell it was talking about.

“Good, because you two have four days to accomplish the gains I requested,” Rex said with a menacing grin, his jaw clacking slightly.

“Four days,” Jason repeated numbly, glancing up at Rex. However, the man had already disappeared, faint eddies of mist the only indication that he had been standing there a moment ago. He thought he could detect an echo of amused laughter.

That deadline seemed impossible. That was only about a day in the real world. Even if they trained every moment and didn’t sleep, he didn’t expect to see those sorts of gains in such a short time. Although, as Jason considered it, he realized that he might be dwelling on the wrong problem.

What exactly would Rex be asking them to do that would increase their stats that quickly?

Chapter 10 - Feral

Frank sat stride a skeletal wolf, the creature loping and bounding down the road in an irregular rhythm. He had never ridden a horse before, but he imagined that the undead hounds were a different experience. His gaze shifted to the area around him, and he noted the several dozen undead riding similar skeletal wolves – the group racing through the dead forest to the drumbeat of ivory feet pounding the dirt road.

These mounts were not bound to Jason. He had chosen to reanimate the wolves using *Undead Devotion* – as he had done with the minotaurs. This meant that the creatures required training and Jason had less flexibility to mold the bones of their shoulder blades and back to accommodate a rider. This problem had been short-lived, however. Cecil had managed to rig a serviceable saddle and Vera had quickly found someone to act as her new stable master.

It wasn't comfortable, but it sure beat running. Frank couldn't help but smile as he recalled their group's first venture outside of the Twilight Throne – where Jason had forced them to run to Peccavi and had used Frank as bait to kill a pack of rogue werewolves. It seemed like an age had passed since then. He glanced down at himself and saw some evidence of the changes he had experienced, large blue veins riddling his muscled arms and a pair of massive axes swinging at his waist.

Not all of the changes had been physical, either. Although, that occasionally caused Frank some concern. It sometimes felt like he was an entirely different person, at least inside AO. At other times, he felt he was the same fat, scared nerd. He hated that other self. Loathed it, in fact. Even now, he could vividly recall the battle with Thorn and how *useless* he had been. Despite how far Frank had come, he hadn't been able to hit the nimble man. Not even once. That thought still made him feel guilty. A part of him had jumped at the chance to get away from the Twilight Throne – or to run away.

His thoughts were interrupted as Vera raised a hand from her position beside him, and the pack slowed. The zombie woman was wearing dark chainmail and a helm that obscured most of her face. Yet her blinding-white eyes were still visible beneath the metal, observing the woods around the group with a singular focus. Her hand rested cautiously on the hilt of her sword, prepared for any danger that might linger nearby.

"What...?" Frank began, but Vera hushed him.

As the group quieted, Frank could finally make out the sound that Vera had sensed. It was a strange noise – almost like grinding or chittering. It reminded him vaguely of a swarm of insects. He couldn't help but glance at Vera in surprise. How had she even heard that when they were at a full gallop?

"What do you think it is?" Frank asked in a whisper.

"I don't know," Vera replied, her eyes troubled. "I've spent quite a bit of time outside of the Twilight Throne helping our recruits level, but this is a first for me."

That didn't do anything to ease his tension. It also didn't help that the sound seemed to be growing louder. Vera must have been thinking the same thing. "Everyone, group up!" she suddenly shouted. "Dismount and circle formation. Archers and mages in the second line."

The undead immediately followed her orders, leaping from their wolf-like mounts and forming a defensive circle in the center of the roadway. The wolves were herded into the center of the formation where Vera and Frank soon found themselves. Frank didn't understand the purpose of the formation, but he wasn't about to question Vera – especially not in front of the other Kin.

As they moved into position, the noise had grown louder until it almost seemed like a horde of locusts had surrounded the group. The undead soldiers eyed the woods apprehensively. The jagged dead tree limbs seemed to loom more menacingly across the roadway than they had before. Frank's knuckles were white as he gripped an axe in each hand. This was the part he hated the most – the calm before the storm – where his mind filled with worry and doubt. Even now, he had to fight the urge to bolt back to the relative safety of the Twilight Throne. With pure grit, he forced himself to remain standing in place, waiting for their unknown assailant to approach.

When the enemy arrived, it wasn't a single creature that breached the shadowed woods; it was a swarm – its number difficult to pin down precisely as the monsters raced out of the woods all around the group. Frank was going to go with "a shitload." The undead creatures moved as a pack, their skeletal feet making surprisingly little noise on the hard-packed dirt.

They appeared to be some sort of undead raptor, each creature running on a pair of bony legs with dark mana rippling across the surface like muscle. Raised to their full height, he assumed they must be five or six feet tall. Although, they kept their bodies low to the ground as they ran forward. They held their arms out ahead of them and each limb ended in vicious-looking claws. It was their head that captured Frank's attention, however. The source of the chittering noise became immediately apparent as he noticed their prehensile

mandibles, their jaws twitching and jumping – causing the bones to grind together.

He instinctively inspected one of the creatures, the gesture almost automatic at this point:

Wraithling – Level 150

Health – Unknown

Mana – Unknown

Equipment – Unknown

Resistances – Unknown

He took all of this in within mere moments as the front line of creatures crashed into the undead infantry. The Wraithlings ripped into the undead soldiers, their claws raking across decayed flesh and cracking bone. Frank saw one of the raptor-like creatures clutch at an undead soldier with its claws. Pulling her close, the Wraithling plunged its jaws into the zombie woman's face, causing congealed blood and viscera to spray in every direction. The woman's body fell limply to the ground.

The Kin were accustomed to combat and had spent weeks hunting in the lands around the Twilight Throne, and this loss did nothing to slow their reactions. Vera began calling out orders. The archers behind the front line entered the fray, their missiles and curses filling the air and the occasional *Void Arrow* causing an explosion among the ranks of Wraithlings to create a pocket for the infantry. The front line used these momentary respites to fill in the holes caused by their casualties before their blades sliced into the skeletal creatures in retaliation – severing arms and legs.

Adrenaline surged through Frank's veins as he surveyed the battle – his worry immediately forgotten as his regular battle rage began to claim him. Without even noticing it, his kneecaps had inverted with a sickening pop, transforming his legs. He barely acknowledged the flash of pain anymore – the sensation only heightening his focus.

Vera looked over at Frank and noticed the way his eyes were trained hungrily on the undead creatures. "Go," she ordered. "Give us a distraction, and I'll have the wolves support you."

Frank didn't wait for any further instruction. His muscles strained with effort as he launched himself nearly twenty feet into the air and over the line of Kin, his mutated legs acting as a natural springboard. He reached the crest of his leap, and his stomach lurched as he began his descent. He readied his axes – raising them over his head and lightning crackling along the blades.

He hit the ground with tremendous force, his axes carving

cleanly through the necks of two of the skeletal creatures. Frank spun in a tight circle, lashing out with his blades, and creating a pocket for himself among the gnashing maws of bone and razor-sharp claws. Cuts and scratches ripped at the skin of his arms and torso, but he barely noticed – his vision honing to a fine point in the heat of battle. He could only focus on the swing of his axe and the ripple of force up his arms as his blows connected – a manic grin painted on his face as his blades ripped into the enemy creatures and their cries filled the air.

And then he was standing in an open space among the Wraithlings. The creatures circled him, backing off slightly at the ferocity of his attack. He met the gaze of their soulless black eyes – a look exchanged between two predators. They pawed at the ground, and the same chittering sound filled the air. They would charge soon. For some reason, he could sense their anticipation – the feeling more instinct than logic.

Shouting broke out behind him and Frank spared a glance back at the line. The shadows of dozens of skeletal forms filled the air, outlined by the occasional flash of lightning that filled the night sky. Their wolves landed with a deadly grace, having bounded over the line of infantry. Frank didn't hesitate, and he immediately summoned *Rage of the Herd* – his body beginning to glow red and his eyes taking on a bloodthirsty appearance. The effect spread to the wolves, who let out tortured howls as their bodies were framed in a blood-red aura.

Then they took the fight to the enemy. The battle raged around Frank, filled with the spine-tingling screech of bone striking bone and cries of pain and snarls of rage. Curses spun and danced through the air, the sharp little needles homing in on the Wraithlings and slowing their movements so that Frank and his wolves could rip apart their weakened foes.

Frank wasn't certain how much time passed as he spun and danced in a ballet of destruction. Yet it felt like only moments later that he stood still – no more enemies within reach of his axes. Nearly a dozen Wraithlings were racing back into the tree line, their chittering barely audible any longer. A hand rested on his shoulder and Frank whirled, his weapons ready.

"Hold, soldier," Vera barked. "I'm not your enemy. It's over." Frank could see that she was right, but he could still feel adrenaline surging through his veins – his body not yet forgetting the conflict. It took a distinct effort to slow his breathing, loop his axes at his waist, and let his legs return to normal.

"You there," Vera called out, pointing at two soldiers. "Mount up and follow the creatures. I want to know where they are retreating to." The men nodded quickly, hopping onto two of the wolves before

bounding off into the forest.

Vera turned her attention back to Frank. "You need to see to your wounds," she offered, almost kindly. Only then did he realize he was sitting at 10% health and his body was stained red with his own blood. He pulled a health potion from his bag and downed its contents in a single gulp – silently thanking Eliza for handing him a goodie bag before he left.

As his thoughts began to clear and his body repaired itself, Frank glanced at Vera. "Why did you send men after those creatures?"

A frown creased the soldier's face. "Because this was unusual. We've spent weeks in these woods fighting the undead around the Twilight Throne." She kicked at one of the nearby piles of bone – what had once been a raptor-like creature. "I've never seen these before – much less packs of this size or strength."

"That is... unusual," Frank agreed. His eyes drifted back across the battlefield. Bones and corpses littered the roadway. He saw more than a dozen of their own soldiers among the dead. The Wraithlings had been vicious and fast. "I doubt that most civilians could have handled that attack. Hell, most travelers wouldn't have survived."

"Even we took heavy losses," Vera agreed with a nod. "But you're right. These things pose a serious risk to travelers along the road. So we're going to track them back to their lair and figure out what we're dealing with. I doubt it will cost us much time on the route to this first village."

"Sounds like a good plan," Frank replied, his attention turning back to the dead men and women lying unmoving on the ground around them. He wasn't certain what they should do for them. Did they bury NPCs in this world? Even if they were already undead?

As he watched, a soldier knelt beside the corpse of a woman. Her arm had been sheared from her body, congealed black blood oozing from the wound and her bleached eyes were vacant of life. The soldier's lips moved as he murmured to the dead woman. Frank couldn't quite hear the words, but he made out something like "final death." Then the soldier ripped off the woman's finger and placed it in his pouch.

"What's he doing?" Frank asked Vera quietly – trying not to let the other soldiers overhear him. He could see other others performing the same macabre ritual for the rest of the dead, pocketing small pieces of their bodies.

"Last rites," she grunted, her eyes clouding as she watched the scene. "Jason offered us a second life with these bodies – one with the promise of immortality. However, we can still die. That much is abundantly clear.

"There have been rumors lately that Jason can inter the bodies

of the Kin in the soul well even after they die – that this allows their souls to live on in the well for eternity,” Vera continued. “So they take a finger from the fallen, in the hope that they can give it to Jason and he can place it inside the well.” She looked on as the soldiers stripped their fallen comrades after performing the ritual, salvaging their gear and equipment.

Frank’s eyes widened as he listened to Vera. There was some truth to what she was saying – Jason had confirmed as much when he told Frank and Riley about the ritual they had performed over the mana well. His friend said he had even met Rex during that ritual. But Frank hadn’t realized that this news had spread to the rest of the Kin and he wasn’t sure whether their souls could really be preserved in the well.

“What do you think?” Frank asked Vera. “Do you think it’s true?”

Vera hesitated, glancing at him before shaking her head. “It doesn’t matter. What’s important is that they believe it. These little *rituals* keep us sane given the risks we face. They give us a sense of control over something immeasurably more powerful than us.” She turned to look at Frank. “Jason can’t stop death. No one can – not even the gods themselves.”

The woman observed Frank’s hard expression as he stared at the fallen, and her hand rested on his shoulder. “Try not to dwell on it. We take things one step at a time – that’s how we move forward. I expect that we will see worse before our task is complete.”

With that, the undead woman walked away, leaving Frank to watch the Kin scour the field and giving him time to dwell on his own troubled thoughts. He would never adapt to how disturbingly *real* this world felt. Would this scene have looked much different had it happened in his world? They were different rites, but the idea was the same. He often felt like the barrier between the game and his other life – his real life – kept breaking down.

His gaze drifted to the ground, and he noticed a speck of cloth below the bones and debris of one of the Wraithlings. He kicked aside the remains to discover the body of a young man, his skeletal form dismembered and his head lying askew. Without thinking, Frank stooped and grabbed the man’s hand, swiftly jerking his arm to remove a finger. The last traces of dark mana that held the man’s body together put up little resistance, and the extremity came free with a soft popping sound.

He looked down at the appendage, his thoughts troubled. Jason had tasked him with conquering the villages around the Twilight Throne. Would he have to kill those townspeople? Would they act like the Kin? Did they have lives and beliefs that gave their digital life

purpose?

It pained Frank to admit that he was only now appreciating the full import of what he might need to do. Despite telling himself that this wasn't real, guilt still hung heavy on his shoulders. He had been hoping to avoid another confrontation with Thorn – another public demonstration of just how useless he had been in that fight. But was this really better? Would he have to kill innocent villagers to conquer these towns? Could he convince them to give up their lives willingly like Jason had done in Peccavi? Did he have that in him?

Frank didn't know how to answer any of those questions – and he couldn't – not right now at least. He placed the finger in his bag and stood, his expression hardening as he watched the Kin tend to their dead. For now, it didn't matter. Vera was right. They needed to take things one step at a time. And their next step was to find where these creatures had come from.

He might have plenty of blood on his hands before this was over, but he would also try to help where he could. That would have to be enough.

Chapter 11 - Malleable

Jason was sitting in the cafeteria at Cerillion Entertainment, trying to shovel food into his mouth as quickly as he could while ignoring the stares of the nearby employees. This was the first time he had logged out of AO in nearly 12 hours. He only had two days or so left in-game and every second he spent here in the real world meant four seconds had passed in-game.

Even now, he felt like he should be training. He had even given up on sleep last night. Although, in some ways, that had been a blessing – avoiding the chaotic, dark dreams that plagued his every unconscious moment. That happy thought reminded him that he needed to swallow another mouthful of coffee – he was on his fourth cup. Hell, he shouldn't be here right now. He had only been forced to visit the cafeteria since his apartment had been completely out of food when he woke up and his body had insisted that eating was a necessity.

Stupid body.

A cough interrupted his shoveling process, and Jason glanced up, his fork hovering in the air. "I, uh, think you might be making people uncomfortable," Robert said dryly as he took a seat across from Jason. He was sporting his usual t-shirt and chucks, although this time his shirt wasn't posing another cringe-worthy gaming joke. Maybe his co-workers had complained.

Somewhat ironically, Robert eyed Jason's wrinkled clothes skeptically before sparing a glance at the nearby employees – most of whom were dressed in immaculate office attire. "I'm surprised no one reported a homeless teenager in the cafeteria. Especially one who looks like he's eating for a family of five." He said this last part while gesturing to the multiple plates set out before Jason.

"Sorry," he mumbled around a mouthful of food, forcing himself to swallow and set down his fork. Once he slowed down, the fatigue immediately began to creep up on him again, and he rubbed at his eyes. "I'm running against a deadline in-game," he tried to explain. "I don't have a lot of time."

"It looks like you didn't sleep last night," Robert observed.

"Well, I sort of slept," Jason replied slowly. He thought he had passed out for a few minutes after a particularly grueling set of exercises. That counted. Kind of.

Robert sighed. "Look. I'm going to be a hypocrite here, I know, but you still have to take care of your body. Bathroom, shower, food –

you know the drill. Alfred can compensate for these functions to some degree by slowing your body's metabolism. But it isn't a substitute. Prolonged abuse of the VR system will cause you to get sick."

"I know, I know," Jason replied. "I just need to get past this hurdle. It's important." His eyes clouded over as he stared at the table, already mentally cataloging the list of things he needed to do once he got back inside AO. Rex had been relentless.

Then a question occurred to Jason – one he hadn't been able to pose to Alfred since the AI had been rather elusive lately. "Since we're sort of on the same topic, one of the NPCs in-game explained that there is a limit to the number of spells I can learn," Jason said, watching Robert's expression carefully. "That seemed odd. Is that really a safety issue or what?"

Robert frowned slightly. "Generally speaking, the way Alfred imparts memories isn't dangerous," he replied. "As best we can tell, the AI replicates the same method by which our brain retains memories – he just speeds up that process considerably. Essentially, you are learning the skill, just very quickly. There were some concerns during testing that this process may have possible negative repercussions. You are still a biological machine, after all. Your body needs maintenance. For example, sleep helps your brain process memories." He said this while grabbing a piece of bacon from one of Jason's plates and smiling wryly.

"So we decided a hard limit was the best approach," Robert continued. "That would allow the players to ease into the game world by learning skills and spells almost instantly and would avoid the need for them to learn an entire language from scratch. We wanted the user experience to be as seamless as possible – especially for people just starting out. But a hard limit prevents them from overdoing it. You could probably still encounter the same issues with the enhanced learning speed, but that would be a bit more difficult since it slows down the process considerably."

Jason's brow furrowed in thought. He had been getting more than his fair share of "brain dumps" – as he was starting to refer to them in his head. He had already gone over the memorization cap, he had been experiencing the Keeper's visions, and he had been using the system to accelerate his school work and learning speed. Although, he hadn't noticed any issues. He had been feeling a little more tired than usual lately – but that could have also been the lack of sleep.

"So there haven't been any negative side effects from going over the memorization cap or training?" Jason asked, his attention turning back to Robert. The engineer hadn't actually answered his question.

Robert hesitated, his eyes darting to the side for just a moment.

“No. To my knowledge, no one has encountered any issues under the current system.”

Jason was tired. Really tired. But he hadn't missed Robert's careful wording or his hesitation. Perhaps something more was going on here. This wasn't a good sign with the CPSC breathing down their necks. Jason would need to remember to ask Alfred – perhaps the AI would give him a straight answer. To Jason's knowledge, he had always been truthful.

“Anyway,” Robert said, breaking the silence that now hung over the table. “I didn't really show up to nag or talk about safety protocols.” He glanced down at the Core on his wrist, noting the time. “But you might want to keep shoveling while we talk – we don't have much time left.”

Jason glanced up at him curiously, but he went back to gorging as fast as possible instead of bothering to pose his obvious question.

“I'm sure you are aware at this point that the CPSC is trying to re-open the investigation into AO and the AI controller that runs the game,” Robert explained, earning him a quick nod from Jason. “Well, there will be a regulatory hearing soon that will decide whether that is going to happen. I'm supposed to retrieve you so that we can meet with George and Francis.”

Jason could suddenly feel his hunger evaporating, replaced by a queasy sensation. Although, he couldn't be sure if this was due to nerves or the two omelets and four pieces of toast he had just eaten. He had been hoping that he had a while before he would have to deal with the CPSC again. Clearly, he had been wrong.

“Yeah, so that's not great news, I know,” Robert said as he saw Jason's expression.

“Why do I need to participate in the meeting?” Jason asked, although he already suspected the answer.

“I think it's better for Francis and George to explain,” Robert replied with a frown. “But I'm sure you can guess at this point that they will probably call you as a witness. I heard about how Gloria ambushed you with your parents,” he added, his expression souring. “God, I hate that woman.”

Jason couldn't help but echo that sentiment. She wasn't exactly his favorite person either. The mention of his parents also didn't make him feel much better. He still wasn't quite sure what Gloria's game plan had been there.

“Anyway, we've gotta roll,” Robert said. “You want to bring a plate or...”

“I think I'm good,” Jason said, pushing away his food. He had suddenly lost his appetite. “I guess we should get this over with.” He could only hope that this meeting would be relatively quick and

painless. He needed to get back in-game.

* * *

Robert and Jason walked into a glamorous conference room on one of the upper floors of the Cerillion Entertainment building. The rectangular enclosure sported floor-to-ceiling windows running along one wall, providing an unimpeded view of the city skyline: towering office buildings glimmering in the sunlight and the city's sky tram network crisscrossing the sky above them. In the center of the room rested a large conference table, not dissimilar to the one in Jason's keep. Although, this version didn't sport intricate scrollwork and the lighting was a little less macabre.

The room fell into silence as the pair entered, Claire, Francis, and George staring at them. "Well, this wasn't the warm introduction I was expecting," Robert offered with a chuckle. "You all seem a bit too serious."

"This is not a lighthearted matter," George retorted, eyeing their clothing skeptically. Jason felt like the CEO wanted to say something but ultimately decided not to bother. He stood and approached quickly, offering a hand to Jason. "It's good to see you again, Jason. How have you been holding up?" George posed this question while examining his face carefully, likely noticing the dark circles under his eyes.

"I guess I've been better," Jason replied.

George nodded. "My apologies for not anticipating the situation with Gloria. That was underhanded – even for her. Yet, our mistake was still inexcusable," he added, glancing at Francis, who grimaced. "Anyway, why don't you both take a seat and we can get started."

Robert and Jason obliged. Claire nodded at Jason before refocusing her attention on the translucent terminal hovering in the air in front of her. To Jason's fatigued brain, she looked more somber and reserved than usual, although it was sometimes hard to tell with Claire. He had spent far less time talking to the severe woman than Robert.

Francis pushed back at his glasses as he observed Jason. "I owe you an apology as well," he offered. "I should have called off the meeting once we saw the detective leaving the CPSC offices. I never expected that woman to use your parents as a prop..."

"It's fine. Really," Jason said quickly. He'd rather just not think about it and get this meeting over with. The one benefit of Rex's ruthless training regime was that at least Jason didn't have the time or

ability to dwell on his problems.

Unfortunately, his hopes were promptly dashed. "I understand that this is a bit sensitive, but have your parents tried to contact you since the meeting?" George asked.

"N-no," Jason replied. "I haven't heard anything from either of them. I don't know if they've spoken to Angie, but I'm guessing they probably haven't. They weren't close with her even before... before our *disagreement*."

"Hmm, well please let us know if they do contact you," Francis urged Jason. "Anything they say at this point may be some sort of ploy on Gloria's part."

Claire spared a glare in the attorney's direction and coughed to get his attention. Francis' eyebrows went up as he seemed to consider something, and he added quickly, "At least until after the hearing. I'm not trying to say you shouldn't speak to your parents, of course."

Except that's exactly what you just said, Jason thought. He wasn't really upset at the suggestion. He wasn't planning to speak to them anytime soon anyway.

"Well, let's move on to the matter at hand," George said, getting their attention. He paused for a moment until he was certain he had their complete focus. "As you are all aware, the CPSC has requested a hearing in front of the regulatory board that oversees their work. They are attempting to re-open an examination of our VR technology, the game world, and the AI controller.

"Unfortunately, we were not able to avoid this hearing," he continued with a small frown of irritation. "The head of the regulatory committee, Senator James Lipton, is up for reelection soon and certain public interest groups are backing his opponent in the race. They would have a field day if he were to refuse to hold a hearing over something with a potentially large impact on public safety. Our recent popularity is a mixed blessing in that regard."

George paused for a moment to ensure that this had sunk in. "The good news is that Mr. Lipton seems skeptical about Gloria's position – our product has already gone through extensive testing, and the incident with the game master gives her a motive to be vindictive. He's also aware of the tactic she used recently with Jason's parents and that hasn't won her much goodwill. I've been assured – off the record – that he will be keeping theatrics to a minimum during the hearing.

"Any questions so far?" George asked.

Jason tentatively raised his hand, not certain exactly why he was here or if he was allowed to pose a question. Although, he had a pressing one in mind.

"Go ahead, Jason. You don't have to raise your hand," George

offered with a small smile.

He felt a small flush of embarrassment, but still had the presence of mind to pose his question. “I guess I’m a little confused. Why do I need to be part of this hearing? Isn’t it mostly going to cover the technical aspects of the game and hardware?”

George sighed. “I’ll let Francis answer this one.”

The attorney pushed back at his glasses again as he looked at Jason. “Under normal circumstances, you would be correct – this hearing would be a rather dry recitation of technical information. However, this isn’t exactly a court case in the traditional sense. The committee is comprised of a panel of senators led by Senator Lipton. They will hear arguments from both the CPSC and Cerillion – as well as witnesses and other supporting information. Normal discovery rules and civil procedure will not apply.”

Francis noted the confusion in Jason’s eyes. “Let me unpack that a bit. One result of the lack of procedure is that more... emotional arguments are permitted and can carry greater weight – particularly since this hearing will more than likely garner media attention. Gloria’s case seems to be that the game is corrupting the minds of the players, manipulating their memories and experiences. You potentially present a very *public* example of that.”

He paused, watching Jason closely. “Keep in mind as I continue that I’m not trying to offend – only to demonstrate what the other side may argue. One downside of my job is that I’m constantly forced to play devil’s advocate,” he added with a grim smile.

“On paper, you were a model student and were attending a prestigious school until only a month ago,” he said, surveying the screen that floated in front of him as he read his notes. “Your termination at Richmond aligns closely with when you started playing the game. Since then, you have gone on to become a rather nefarious individual in-game.”

“My expulsion happened before I started playing,” Jason said quietly. He spared a glance at George – recalling exactly who had been responsible for that. To his credit, the CEO actually looked mildly ashamed. “It’s also a game,” he offered. “I’ve never really...” He had started to say, *hurt anyone*.

His sudden silence didn’t go unnoticed. Everyone at the table looked uncomfortable, and Claire refused to meet his gaze, her hands clenching on the tabletop. She had kept silent for most of the meeting, merely watching the conversation apprehensively.

“I see you understand the predicament,” Francis said, not unkindly. “The expulsion is close enough in time to be concerning. Unfortunately, emotion tends to trump facts. While AO might be a game, it’s also extremely realistic. Videos of your conduct in-game

certainly won't help us."

The attorney paused for a moment as though weighing his words carefully. "As for the incident at your aunt's house, that one is quite troubling. The good news is that the DA has decided not to pursue criminal charges – which seems reasonable given that the two teenagers broke into your home and they were armed. However, the detective could still testify at this hearing, and this doesn't mean that the breakin is off the table. We should expect this to be an issue."

Jason's hands balled into fists. He could already envision what the detective would say. He had already been suspicious of Jason's testimony regarding the breakin, and with good reason. He – or Alfred – had stabbed one of the teenagers fifteen times. They were probably going to paint him as a closet sociopath. Suddenly, the memory of his parents' faces appeared in his mind's eye. If his own parents hadn't believed him, what would other people think?

"This doesn't mean that we will fail," George interrupted Jason's dark thoughts. "We just want to be candid with you about your role here. The CPSC will almost certainly call you as a witness and so it is important for you to be prepared. With that in mind, we would like for you to attend these hearings in person."

"What?" Jason blurted.

"I know this may be uncomfortable for you, but it will help our case if you attend and appear presentable and respectful," Francis offered. "We want the senators to see you regularly. It's much easier to villainize someone who isn't in the room and who is routinely dressed in a dark cloak while cutting another player's throat. It's an entirely different story when that person is sitting sedately in front of you wearing a suit. Unfortunately, appearance and perception will matter a great deal here."

Jason sighed. He couldn't refute the attorney's logic. Aside from not wanting to be placed on a very public stage or be used as a prop, he was also concerned about the loss of time. Each real-world hour cost him four hours in-game, and he was already running against the clock.

"I understand that this goes a bit outside the bounds of your streaming agreement with Claire and Robert," George offered, misinterpreting Jason's hesitation. "In fact, much of what has transpired lately is a bit outside the norm – including your current living arrangements."

Jason glanced up at him sharply. Was he trying to imply that Jason was beholden to the company? Or to use his apartment as some sort of leverage? He couldn't deny that he was dependent on the company, but that was still going too far.

"Let me rephrase," George said in a reassuring tone as he saw

Jason's expression. "I plan to have paperwork drawn up this afternoon entitling you to stay in the apartment downstairs for as long as you want. This will not be contingent upon your attending the hearing or your testimony. I want you to understand that we are on your side, Jason."

Jason met the older man's gaze. He wasn't naïve enough to think that George would be making this offer if they didn't need him, but their interests *did* align – at least for now. Although, that might change depending on what they asked at the hearing and what he chose to reveal. Even as that thought crossed his mind, he recalled his last conversation with Alfred. Hell, the fact that he was even *talking* to Alfred was a problem. What if they discovered that gem? Would they still be on his side?

"Fine," Jason finally said. "I'm not sure I see any other options." He let out a soft sigh. "I guess the only question I have left is when is this going to happen?" Maybe he could at least put off the hearing for a few weeks while he dealt with the issues plaguing the Twilight Throne.

"The hearing starts tomorrow," George answered immediately.

Jason's eyes widened in shock. "Shit," he murmured.

Robert barked out a laugh that he unsuccessfully tried to suppress as George glared at him. "Sorry, kid," he said to Jason, slapping him on the back. "I would have warned you sooner, but they didn't want to upset you for no reason."

George nodded. "You won't have much of a role to play in this first session, and we expect the hearing to take at least a week or two. Francis assures me that these things can be longwinded and painful. Speaking of which, we don't plan to keep you there all day. The first session should be introductory. After this, we only need you to attend for a few hours each day and smile for the cameras."

"Try not to worry too much," Francis added, a sympathetic look on his face as he watched Jason. "I'm sure it won't be as painful as you expect."

Jason might be turning into a pessimist, but he couldn't shake the feeling that Francis was wrong about that. With his current track record, the building would probably explode, and then he would get blamed. Besides, he had plenty to worry about aside from the upcoming hearing. This was going to suck up even more time that he should be using to train and address the issues plaguing his city.

At the end of the day, he still needed to keep up his performance in-game, despite George's assurances that he would have a place to stay. His eyes darted to the CEO, noting the way the man's warm expression faltered when he looked away. He had seen the shark-like look in George's eyes before – those moments when his thin

veneer of civility cracked. His priority would always be his company's bottom line. Jason knew that he would only be rewarded if he continued to be of value to the company.

Which meant he needed to get back in-game. He was wasting time – time that he didn't have. He politely excused himself after that, each person at the table trying their best to console him as they bid him farewell.

As he stepped out of the conference room, he let out a pained sigh and slumped back against a wall. His problems settled like an almost physical weight upon his shoulders, pressing him down. A small part of his mind was actually looking forward to the training – if only to escape his worrying, nagging thoughts. He had no idea how he was going to juggle everything.

“Perhaps I should just stop sleeping entirely,” he murmured.

Chapter 12 - Exhausted

Jason pushed the weight forward, his back pressing hard into the bench beneath him and his arms trembling with the effort. Sweat dripped down into his eyes and obscured his vision, but he didn't need to see for this. After hundreds of repetitions, his digital muscles knew their job. At least the salty liquid blotted out the red warning notifications that flashed incessantly in his peripheral vision. He already knew what they said, but he hadn't found a way to shut them off.

System Notice

Your stamina has reached zero. Continued strenuous effort will drain health at the rate of 500 health per sec (scaled). If your character's health reaches zero, you will die.

In addition to the health drain, the loss of his stamina also reduced Jason's statistics considerably, leaving him feeling even weaker than usual. Fun fact, he'd discovered that his stats couldn't be reduced below zero. Although, one point in strength seemed to place him at the level of a small child.

Despite the pain that radiated from his chest and the almost embarrassing amount of weight on the bar, he kept going. His focus had narrowed to a single goal – lifting the gods' damned bar. His breath came in ragged gasps, which soon turned to hacking coughs as his health continued to deplete. He could taste coppery blood in his mouth, and he turned his head to avoid choking on the substance as his failing body neared its end.

Just a little farther, he thought weakly.

His arms suddenly straightened, and he felt a flash of victory. However, the feeling was short-lived as his blurred vision went completely dark and another notification appeared in front of him – this one was accompanied by a merciful lack of pain.

System Notice

You have died.

Thanks for playing Awaken Online!

Jason ignored the notification, reveling in his painless existence for just a moment. He only had a few seconds until he would have to start again, repeating his training regime in an endless cycle. These rooms below the keep appeared to be unique, allowing Jason to avoid the 45-minute lockout at death. Although, after hours spent locked in hellish training, he wasn't certain that he saw this as an advantage.

In a blink, Jason was standing in the training room again. He immediately collapsed to his knees, breathing heavily as his muscles trembled. His body always remembered the state he was in just before he died, even though he was no longer affected by the debuffs. It was strange, but he had come to accept it. It usually took his body a few minutes to realize that he was fine again – his stamina refilled and his limbs ready to go through the merciless training regime once again.

He was just about to struggle to his feet again when another notification flashed in front of him, the blue glare bright in the otherwise dark room.

System Notice

Constant, grueling activity has caused your body to become fatigued for the next six in-game hours. Any continued physical exertion will not increase your statistics or any skills requiring physical activity.

Jason sighed. This wasn't a reprieve. It just meant that he needed to switch to training his new spells, casting his *Bone Armor* and *Bone Absorption* spells until the gestures and words were second nature, and his hands began to cramp. He would be at this for hours before moving on to the training dummies again. Then back to weights.

He groaned as he rose to his feet and turned to face the door to the challenge room. He needed to be near the stockpile of bones for this next part. Just as he was about to head off to start his spellcasting training, he heard a cough behind him. He turned slowly, not concerned. There were only a handful of people that knew he was

down here. Besides, if it was an enemy, maybe it would kill him. That would buy him another few seconds reprieve.

Riley was staring at him, her expression neutral as she observed his haggard appearance. "How are things topside?" he asked, his voice sounding ragged even to his own ears and he slumped down on a nearby bench.

"It's been quiet – too quiet actually," she replied, her eyes concerned as she watched him shuffle over to sit on one of the benches. "The Order hasn't made a move yet, but Jerry also hasn't found anything. It's just a matter of time."

"And Eliza and Morgan?" Jason asked, his body finally beginning to relax. It felt good to just sit for a while without doing anything else.

"The cave complex is coming along well, and they hope to start growing the first crop of herbs soon. I couldn't get Morgan to even look up from her books when I 'spoke' with her," Riley replied with a frown. "I guess that means she hasn't found anything about this *gate* yet."

She hesitated for a moment, a confused mixture of emotions flitting across her face. Then she seemed to resign herself. "Are you okay?" she finally asked. She came over to sit beside him, although Jason noticed that she kept a small distance between them.

Of course, she would ask him that. From her perspective, he was literally killing himself to meet Rex's goal. Riley's training had been quite a bit more relaxed. It was grueling and tough, but she was also starting much further ahead than Jason – which meant she got much more out of her training sessions and had quite a bit more stamina to work with. As a result, she had time to do things like check on the rest of the Shadow Council.

Jason was tired. Actually, he was well past "tired." He wasn't sure there was a word for what he felt right now. Four in-game days was roughly 24 hours in the real world. The truth was that his real body hadn't slept at all during that period and his waking mind, even in game, felt like it had experienced four whole days without rest. This was on top of the mental exhaustion of literally training himself to death countless times. He had done some marathon gaming sessions in the past, but nothing like this.

So, he was also honest with Riley – deception requiring at least some energy. "No. No, I'm not okay," he grunted.

"What's going on?" Riley asked hesitantly. "You don't have to tell me, of course, but you're pushing yourself way beyond even what Rex asked you to do."

Jason shook his head. He hadn't told her about the CPSC yet. Why would he? They were barely talking, and Riley seemed to be

going out of her way to avoid him over the last few days in-game. Yet another problem that he had somehow created and didn't know how to fix. She was still his friend – whatever issues they might have right now. And he could really just use someone to talk to.

"The CPSC hearing starts tomorrow," he said quietly. "They're more than likely going to call me as a witness – not tomorrow, but eventually. They're probably going to paint me as some sort of psychopath." He closed his eyes, trying to will away the image of his parents' judging looks when he had seen them last. He could only hope they wouldn't be at the hearing. That might be too painful to bear.

"Shit," Riley muttered.

"Yeah," Jason replied. What else could you say to that?

"Maybe..." she began tentatively. "Maybe, I could come to the hearing?"

Jason glanced at her in surprise. He hadn't been expecting that – not with the way their relationship had been going lately. *Although I suppose it's easy to pity me*, he thought bitterly. Despite the anger he felt at that thought, he found he still wanted her there. George and his group weren't really on his side, and they had their own agenda. Angie had to work. Who else would be going just for him?

He noticed he had gone too long without responding and Riley's hands were fidgeting in her lap. "I-I would actually like that," Jason finally answered. "Thank you," he said quietly.

Riley opened her mouth to say something else, but a dinging sound suddenly echoed through the room, interrupting her. That was Rex's way of summoning them. Jason tapped at the system UI and pulled up the in-game clock. It seemed they had reached the undead general's deadline. He must have lost track of time. A mixture of relief and worry washed over him as he realized that this was the moment of truth. He might not have to train anymore, but had he really worked hard enough to reach their goal?

"I guess we should get this over with," Jason said tiredly, forcing himself to rise to his feet.

The pair made their way into the challenge room. Blue torches ignited around them, and, as they moved, the light cast shadows across the piles of bones that littered the room. They made a beeline for the pillar in the center of the room, and, as they neared it, Jason placed his palm on its surface.

Rex soon appeared beside the column, his wispy body wavering and rippling erratically. His dark eyes focused on the pair, his gaze lingering on Jason's haggard form for just a moment. "Alright, it's been four days! Let's not tiptoe around the ominous question on everyone's mind. It's time to check your progress. Pull up your

Character Status sheets.”

Riley quickly pulled up her own sheet as Jason hesitated. He had turned off all of his skill and statistic notifications while training – since he found them distracting and disheartening. In the beginning, it seemed like he had been moving far too slowly to possibly accomplish Rex’s goal. Now he would need to turn everything back on. He found it difficult to force himself to bring up his Character Status. Maybe he could fake a stroke or something instead. It didn’t seem that unlikely given his current physical and mental state.

“Good, good,” Rex said as he inspected the air in front of Riley, presumably looking at her Character Status. “You’ve made excellent headway. Good job.”

Then the skeletal man turned his dark gaze toward Jason. “Well, let’s see how you did, boy.”

With a sigh, Jason forced himself to pull up the system menus, quickly tapping through the icons. There was no help for it. He would have to see how well – or poorly – he had done. A barrage of notifications greeted him.

x10 Spell Rank Up: Bone Armor

Skill Level: Intermediate Level 1

Cost: 50 units.

Effect 1: Create intermediate bone armor. Each piece of armor has 350 health.

Effect 2: Increased coverage by 10%.

x11 Spell Rank Up: Bone Absorption

Skill Level: Intermediate Level 3

Effect 1: Your storage limit is currently 113 units.

Effect 2: Can now absorb up to 3 units at once.

x12 Skill Rank Up: Toughness

Skill Level: Intermediate Level 3

Effect 1: -7% damage and pain.

Effect 2: Reduced fatigue duration by 12%.

New Passive Skill: Staff Combat

You have learned the basics of staff combat, lending greater accuracy and defense while wielding a staff weapon. High-level staff users are known to be almost impenetrable walls, capable of even deflecting spells and projectiles. You can see this goal in the distant, distant horizon.

Effect: 5% Increased damage and accuracy.

x8 Skill Rank Up: Staff Combat

Skill Level: Beginner Level 9

Effect: 9% Increased damage and accuracy.

x4 Skill Rank Up: Dodge

Skill Level: Beginner Level 9

Effect: 4.5% Increased speed and reaction time.

Stat Increases:

+ 49 Strength

+ 47 Dexterity

+ 42 Endurance

“Jesus,” Jason muttered as he reviewed the notifications. That had been a lot more progress than he had been expecting. Although, he supposed it was reasonable after what he had endured – most players probably wouldn’t willingly work themselves to death.

Still, his stomach sank as he saw the notice showing his statistic increases. Despite everything he had put himself through, he had still failed to meet Rex’s goal. With a sinking feeling, he pulled up his Character Status screen.

Character Status

Gender:

Male

Class:

Warrior

Level:

100

H-Regain/Sec:

1000

M-Regain/Sec:

1000

Strength:

1000

Endurance:

1000

Affinities

Light:

Water:

Earth:

Rex eyed the screen, his expression neutral. Jason was expecting some sort of tirade or recrimination. He had failed. There was no getting around that. He should have pushed himself harder.

“Not too shabby,” Rex commented, interrupting Jason’s thoughts. “You were a bit short of fifty points in each category, but you made it a lot further than I expected.”

Jason stared at the skeleton in shock. “Wait, what?”

Rex shrugged. “I didn’t really think you’d succeed. The task I gave you was impossible – especially for a resident of this world. The only way you managed to get close was by literally training yourself to death. That isn’t a luxury most of my trainees used to have. Even so, there’s just a limit to what a person can accomplish in such a short amount of time.”

Jason could feel anger blooming in his chest. “So, you lied to me?”

Rex met his gaze evenly. “I get that you’re upset. I tricked you, sort of. But I also knew that if I set you a task – especially an unachievable one – you would push yourself harder. We can’t afford to waste time here. Yes, I lied. And you made it further in four days than most soldiers make it in months. So you’re welcome!”

He was finding it difficult to argue with Rex’s reasoning, although that might have been due in part to the way the world around him kept stuttering and dancing slightly. Damn it, he was tired.

“Anyway, this was a good first effort,” Rex continued, glancing between Riley and Jason. “I think the two of you might actually be able to succeed before Thorn’s deadline.”

“First effort?” It was Riley’s turn to look skeptical. Her training might have been easier than Jason’s – more stamina and higher natural stats made the tasks infinitely less painful – but it had still been a grueling effort for both of them.

Rex sighed. “Of course. Did you think this was the end? No, you two are going to keep training every day, at least until you hit the fatigue debuff. I’m not letting you run the challenge until you do.”

Jason closed his eyes as Rex and Riley spoke, trying to make the world stop spinning. This had never happened to him before. A few moments later, he felt a little more stable, and he was able to concentrate again. As he looked up, he found both Rex and Riley staring at him expectantly.

“What? I missed that,” he said. “Are we going to run the challenge now?”

Riley just shook her head, glaring accusingly at Rex. Even the skeleton looked a little nervous. “No, no you’re not,” Rex replied. “You’re going to go get some rest.”

“We need to keep moving,” Jason protested. “You said it yourself. We don’t have much time left.”

Rex stared him down. “Knowing your limits is just as important as growing stronger, and you are well past your limit. You can barely stand, and your eyes aren’t focusing on me any longer.” Rex snapped his fingers in Jason’s face to prove his point, and Jason jumped belatedly. “Attempting the challenge would be a waste of time. You can try again tomorrow.”

Jason opened his mouth to protest, but the skeletal man just shook his head, disappearing in a trail of smoke that streamed back inside the nearby orb. Apparently, Rex had decided it was easier to bail on the conversation than to continue arguing. For a moment, Jason considered dipping his hand into the mana well and dragging the former general’s irritating, bony ass back. After everything he had put them through, he was just going to walk off?

“He’s right,” Riley interjected quietly. “You need some rest. Besides, tomorrow is the hearing. You should probably be alert for that.”

Jason whirled, his mouth open to snap at her. But then he paused. She was right. So was Rex. He knew it. He just didn’t want to hear it, and the truth was that he didn’t want to go to sleep. He knew the dreams would come back to haunt him, and, the faster he fell asleep, the sooner it would be tomorrow. He turned away from Riley so that she couldn’t see his face, or the moisture accumulating at the corners of his eyes.

“Fine,” he replied in a resigned voice. Then he tapped at his system UI and disappeared in a flash of multi-colored light.

Riley stood staring at the spot he had occupied only a moment before. “Good night, Jason,” she murmured, her expression downcast. Then she too disappeared.

Chapter 13 - Evolved

“Hold,” Vera said quietly, raising a mailed fist as she hugged the trunk of a ruined tree, its jagged branches spearing into the dark sky.

Frank took up a spot beside Vera as the other undead in their scouting parties assumed positions around them. At a gesture from the undead general, several archers clambered up the dead trees, finding secure spots with a good vantage point of the area in front of them.

“What is it?” Frank whispered.

“The trail for those Wraithlings ends here,” Vera murmured in response. “I suspect their nest is just ahead.”

Frank peered around the tree, noticing a clearing ahead of them. However, the area seemed darker than usual, an almost palpable fog obscuring his vision. That was odd. He hadn’t spent quite as much time in the Twilight Throne as Jason, but his *Night Vision* should have given him an unimpeded view of the clearing.

“Why can’t I see?” he asked Vera, noticing that the woman was checking her equipment and pulling her sword gently from its scabbard to the muffled sound of scraping metal.

“That will be clear in a moment,” the woman replied, meeting his gaze with her pale eyes. “Ready yourself. You and I are going to be the bait.”

Shit, Frank thought to himself. *Why am I always the bait?* At least he was going to have some company this time. With a sigh, he followed Vera’s instructions, pulling his axes from the loops at his waist and his legs transforming with a faint popping sound.

Vera held up a hand, three fingers raised. Then she began counting down. At one, she darted forward, Frank just behind her as the pair raced toward the clearing. Their legs pounded the dry, cracked dirt as the cloud of darkness hovered in the air in front of them. Frank spared a surprised glance at Vera – noticing that she was easily keeping up with him even with his mutated legs. At that moment, Frank realized he had never really seen the zombie woman in combat – real combat anyway. She had spent most of their last encounter directing the troops instead of engaging directly.

As they neared the clearing, a chittering sound filled the air – the sound conjuring recent memories of the raptor-like creatures and forcing Frank to focus. Even at this distance, his *Night Vision* refused to penetrate the black fog that seemed to hover over the clearing, making it difficult to pinpoint the enemy’s numbers. The only

consolation was that the grating sound was fainter than it had been on the road. Hopefully, that meant they were facing fewer opponents.

Vera glanced at Frank from where she ran beside him. Despite their breakneck pace, she didn't seem out of breath. "Get ready to sprint back to the tree line," she shouted. "We'll move as soon as the first of the undead break through the cloud."

Frank just nodded, saving his stamina. He didn't have to wait long. The first of the Wraithlings came racing out of the fog, their bony mandibles clicking and grinding furiously as their malevolent black eyes trained on Vera and Frank. Vera didn't hesitate. She slid to a stop, creating a cloud of dust, before rotating quickly on her heel and racing back the way they had come. Frank followed her lead, stumbling slightly at the abrupt halt. He made up for his lost ground by using his mutated legs to leap forward – quickly catching back up with Vera.

The raptor-like creatures raced behind them, gaining ground slowly despite the pair's swift pace. Then the air filled with the sound of a different type of buzzing, dark streaks racing past Frank and Vera from the other direction. The missiles slammed into the Wraithlings, burying themselves in joints and weak points before exploding violently. A miasma of darkness ripped apart the monsters and sent their dismembered bodies tumbling to the ground.

Vera glanced over at Frank, and they shared a look. She didn't need to communicate the next order. As the second round of missiles streaked past, she turned again – followed only a moment later by Frank. The pair squared off against the dozen or so remaining Wraithlings that had made it through the barrage of *Void Arrows*.

The undead general seemed to disappear from beside Frank, leaving behind a silhouette of dark energy. She reappeared beside the Wraithlings, her blade striking with pinpoint precision – cleanly severing limbs and heads. Frank stood frozen in shock for a moment as he watched her work. As she cut a swath of destruction through the undead creatures, he couldn't help but wonder if the woman even needed his help.

His moment of hesitation allowed the remaining Wraithlings to catch up and he barely raised an axe in time to ward off an incoming sweep of one creature's claws, the bones throwing off sparks as they scraped against the blade of his weapon. Frank rotated with the blow, using his newfound momentum to launch a counterattack, his axes soon biting into bone. He swung his weapons in huge arcs, forgoing any defense as he slammed his blades into the bony creatures.

Within a few moments, only corpses littered the ground, and Vera and Frank stood alone. The undead general cleaned her blade on the hem of her tunic, scraping off the fine white powder before

sheathing it. As far as Frank could tell, she hadn't been hit. Vera glanced at Frank, noticing the cuts and scrapes across his chest and arms and she frowned slightly. He hadn't fared quite as well in that last fight and he caught the unspoken rebuke in her expression, his cheeks flushing slightly in embarrassment.

Vera raised her fist and spoke loudly to the Kin at the tree line, "Move forward and take up a defensive perimeter around the nest. Don't let anything out of the circle." Frank heard thumps behind them as the archers followed her orders swiftly, dropping from their perches and sprinting to form a circle around the dense black cloud.

"What now?" Frank asked Vera, eyeing the eerie fog. He had never seen anything like this before, and he knew when to follow someone else's lead.

The hint of a grin swept across the undead woman's face. "Now we go investigate. We should have a few moments before more creatures spawn, but we should move quickly."

Frank frowned in confusion. What did she mean "spawn?" He didn't even get a chance to ask before Vera was running, and he was forced to jog to catch up.

As the pair entered the cloud, Frank could feel the vapor pushing back at him, as though it were resisting his entrance. It almost seemed to pulse with energy, causing his skin to tingle. The sensation was strange, and it was clear that the fog was not natural. As they pushed through the substance, suddenly Frank's vision cleared, causing him to stop and gape in surprise.

The black fog ringed a roughly circular clearing. Bones of all shapes and sizes littered the ground, leaving none of the gray dirt visible. In the center stood a massive, heaping pile of ivory bones. The tower stretched nearly twenty feet into the air. Wisps of dark energy leaked from the ground and drifted toward the pile, creating an ominous aura that hovered inches away from its surface. This energy funneled up the column of bone before arcing away and forming the dome of darkness that surrounded the clearing.

"What the hell is this?" Frank murmured.

"A nest," Vera replied curtly, her gaze troubled. "These are common around the Twilight Throne... but I've never seen one this big."

"I don't understand," Frank said. "What do you mean by a nest?"

Vera spared a glance at him, her brow furrowing in confusion. "Ahh, I forget that you haven't spent much time exploring the area around the city. Even so, I'm sure you've noticed that Jason's conversion of the Twilight Throne and surrounding area also affected the wildlife – flesh-and-blood animals reduced to skeletal monsters."

Frank nodded. He had just hacked his way through a few examples.

“Well, just like normal animals, the undead creatures need to reproduce,” Vera explained as she picked her way carefully through the nest, her eyes on the ground as though searching for something.

“How can they reproduce without... err, the right parts,” he asked awkwardly.

Vera spared him a small smile. “You’re right, normal reproduction is out of the question. But life finds a way. Instead, of procreating like normal animals, the undead creatures hunt one another – gathering the remains and using them to form these nests. They seem to be able to sense the dark mana that binds together their bones and sustains them.”

She gestured to the wisps of dark energy streaming toward the central bone pillar. “The collection of bones creates a whirlpool of death that collects and pools ambient dark mana...” She trailed off as she saw several bones trembling.

Suddenly, dark mana flashed between the bones, and they rose into the air, spinning and spiraling. As Frank looked on, the bones coalesced into a rough form, bands of dark mana lashing the ivory substance together. In an instant, another Wraithling stood inside the nest, eyeing the area in confusion.

Vera didn’t hesitate. She launched forward in a flash of movement, drawing her sword with blinding speed. The Wraithling’s skull toppled to the ground, followed closely by its body – the dark energy leaking back into the nest. “The nests spontaneously create new creatures. They aren’t always of the same type. We’ve noticed that the nest seems to draw on the imprints or forms of the creatures that were used to form the wellspring of dark mana. Sometimes, the result is new creatures – odd hybrids of existing animals.”

She looked down at the creature’s corpse with a frown. “Including these Wraithlings. They’re something new.”

Frank was floored. This was quite a bit more involved than he had expected. He had just assumed... He hesitated to finish that thought. If he were honest, he hadn’t given much thought to how the undead around the Twilight Throne reproduced. He had assumed that they just appeared from nowhere – much like any other game.

Something about Vera’s explanation felt off, however. He turned back to her as she picked her way across the field to the bone tower. “So if the undead reproduce by hunting one another, how do smaller or weaker undead creatures stay alive?” Frank asked. In the real world, weaker prey animals survived since they could reproduce on their own and usually in large numbers, but here, that wouldn’t work.

Vera nodded slightly. “The answer is that they don’t. This process only favors predators, the stronger, the better. You’ve probably begun to notice that the creatures around the Twilight Throne only continue to grow more powerful over time – just like with these Wraithlings.”

Frank’s thoughts were spinning. “Basically the only thing stopping a single apex predator from evolving would be roughly equal competition among the different types of animals,” he said aloud, almost talking to himself.

“Exactly,” Vera replied as she reached the tower. Her pale eyes scanned its surface carefully. “Now you can understand my concern. This nest is far too large. This isn’t consistent with that balance, and nests like these threaten to throw it off. If a nest like this were allowed to grow even larger...” She trailed off as her hand pulled at the bones of the tower.

Frank didn’t need her to complete the thought. He saw the problem now. An even larger nest could produce a creature that they hadn’t seen before – something so powerful that it could take out whole groups of players or Twilight Throne troops. It would dominate the local wildlife. Hell, it was possible that something could form that could threaten the city itself. He didn’t even want to think about that.

“What do we have here?” Vera murmured, cradling something in her hands. Frank approached her quickly and soon discovered that she was holding a crystal nearly the size of a human fist. This didn’t look like something that had occurred naturally. The sides of the crystal had been filed into neat facets. Even more disconcerting was the way the gem seemed to suck in the faint light in the clearing.

“What is it?” Frank asked.

“I’m not sure,” Vera said, shaking her head. “I’ve never seen one of these crystals before – maybe they form naturally when the nests grow large enough? But it looks like it was created by human hands.” Her gaze darted to the rest of the nest. “Let’s regroup with the rest of the troops. We may need to send a runner back to the Twilight Throne.”

Frank nodded, and the pair made their way out of the nest. He kept glancing at the crystal in Vera’s hand. Was she right? Had someone helped create this nest? And to what end? He shook his head. That seemed crazy – even suicidal.

As they exited the nest, one of the archers approached. “Ma’am,” he said, addressing Vera. “We found evidence of a camp a few dozen yards to the west. It looks like it hasn’t seen any activity in at least a few days – but someone was definitely staying in this area.”

Vera grimaced. “Damn it,” she muttered. “Well, that pokes a hole in my theory that these crystals are natural.” She turned back to

the archer. "Congratulations! You just volunteered to visit the Twilight Throne." She tossed the crystal to the undead soldier. "Take a mount and a companion with you. Hand this to a member of the Shadow Council and explain what we found here. We believe that someone may be trying to enlarge the nests around the city."

The man's bleached eyes widened in shock for a moment. Yet he recovered quickly as Vera stared at him, bowing before darting off into the woods to carry out her orders.

"You really think someone helped create that?" Frank asked, gesturing over his shoulder at the nest as his thoughts spun in circles. He couldn't see what someone would hope to gain by enlarging these nests and throwing off the natural balance in the forest.

"That seems like the most likely answer," Vera said. "Perhaps they planted these crystals to help accelerate the natural growth of the nest. That's actually somewhat clever..." she admitted grudgingly.

Frank just shook his head in confusion. He still didn't see the point. Someone would have had to purchase or craft the mana crystals, imbue them with dark mana somehow, and then trot out here into the woods to find a nest and plant them – which likely entailed considerable risk and expense. It seemed crazy.

"What do we do now?" he finally asked.

She glanced at Frank. "We destroy the nest, and then we complete Jason's task. Hopefully, we nipped this problem in the bud by defeating the Wraithlings." As she finished speaking, Vera gestured at the tree line and several mages moved forward. They promptly lined up beside the nest, and flames began to curl around the top of their staves. Fire mages in the Twilight Throne were rare, but not unheard of. Many of the residents had been practiced in the other affinities before they were turned.

Frank suddenly raised a hand. "Wait," he ordered. They looked between him and Vera in confusion.

"We need to stop this nest from continuing to spawn the Wraithlings," Vera said, a glimmer of irritation lingering in her bleached eyes. "Why are you stopping the mages?"

Frank shook his head. "Based on what you just told me, if we destroy this nest, we will permanently reduce the number of creatures that spawn around the Twilight Throne, right?"

"True, but it will barely make a dent," Vera replied with a shrug.

"Assuming this is the *only* nest," Frank retorted. The undead woman tilted her head slightly at this. "We have to think about maintaining the area on more than just a short-term basis. How will we level our own troops if we simply destroy every nest?"

Vera sighed. "Okay, then what would you have us do?"

Frank hesitated. He hadn't expected her to give in that easily. "Well, I think we should leave a division here – have them break up the nest and return the bones to the Twilight Throne. We can either spread the materials later to create new, smaller nests, or Jason can repurpose the materials for the city somehow."

"That will leave us with only a single division, and we have yet to conquer even one of these outlying villages. We don't know how much resistance we might encounter. Plus, we've already experienced unforeseen casualties from the Wraithling attack," Vera cautioned.

They were all good points, but he could already imagine what Jason would say if they wasted the materials in this nest. They had to start thinking long-term. "I think we can manage. We will just need to be cautious. The benefit to the city may well outweigh the risk."

The undead general mulled on this for a moment before coming to a decision. "Fine. I agree." She then turned and began issuing orders, the undead jumping to follow through on them.

Meanwhile, Frank stared at the billowing black fog that still hovered over the nest. He hoped he had made the right decision. Vera had made a good point about weakening their own forces. Perhaps this nest was just an anomaly, but the crystal they had discovered gave him pause. Something in Frank's gut told him that there was something more going on here. He briefly considered messaging Jason but then thought better of it.

Riley had told him about Jason's training and the upcoming hearing with the CPSC. His friend had more than enough on his plate right now, and Frank should wait until he had something definitive before piling on. However, this didn't stop him from wanting to talk with Jason. Things had been so much easier when someone else was making the big decisions.

This expedition wasn't turning out to be quite as simple as he had expected.

Chapter 14 - Anxious

Jason sat in the limousine, tugging at his collar uncomfortably. It felt like his tie was making it difficult to breathe. He had woken up that morning to the incessant chime of his Core, the damn device announcing that today was the day – the first session of the regulatory hearing. He had barely managed to pull himself out of bed, and only a constant stream of coffee kept him standing as he showered and got ready.

It was only after he made his way out of the bathroom that he realized he had nothing to wear to a regulatory hearing – he assumed a t-shirt and jeans probably wouldn't suffice. Luckily, George had more foresight than he did. At some point in the night, someone had entered the apartment and laid out a suit on the couch in the living room. Jason was pretty sure the clothes cost more than his annual salary from Cerillion. However, he soon found that more expensive didn't translate to more comfortable. Not for the first time, he wondered why men were expected to wear ties.

"It will be okay," George assured him from where he sat across from Jason, interpreting Jason's fidgeting as a sign of worry. "You won't have to do anything during this first session. Just sit there, look attentive, and smile."

"I'm going to be the one doing the talking," Francis added in a distracted voice from his seat beside George. He had been reviewing his notes from the moment they had piled into the limo, a translucent blue screen wavering in front of him and his lips moving slightly as he read. Jason could only assume that he was preparing for his part in the hearing.

"Yeah, we get to sit and enjoy the *riveting* show," Robert said while rolling his eyes. "I even brought one of those neck pillows, and Claire promised to kick me if I start snoring."

This earned Robert a grimace from Claire, who had been unusually quiet lately – both during their last meeting and now during the car ride. "I would hope you have more sense than that," she replied curtly. The engineer's grin only widened in response.

Jason had noticed that Claire kept looking at him when she thought he wasn't paying attention. He could only assume that she must be worried about him. She had always been the more empathetic member of the group, and she likely appreciated that this was going to be a grueling experience for him.

For some reason, the group's comments and banter didn't make

Jason feel any better. He knew that Gloria had something up her sleeve that she hadn't revealed yet. This was always the worst part about confronting an anxious moment – whether it was a particularly important exam or a highly televised public hearing. It was the moments leading up to the event that were the worst. That interminable period where you couldn't do anything but dwell on the many and varied ways it could end catastrophically. Jason hated waiting.

They pulled up in front of the city hall building a few long minutes later – large columns dotting the entrance. George had somehow managed to convince the regulatory committee to meet in town – likely since the CPSC headquarters and Cerillion Entertainment were both located in the city, and so were most of the witnesses that would be speaking at the hearing.

Jason already had a high estimation of George's influence, but this was still an eye-opening demonstration of how much power his company wielded. Large public companies like Cerillion Entertainment had gained ever-increasing influence in government over the decades. Money was power and Jason had no illusions about that – not after experiencing this firsthand while watching his parents go toe-to-toe with some of those same companies. However, it was still jarring to see a group of senators bend over backward to accommodate George's demands.

As the car pulled up in front of the building, Jason's eyes widened in surprise. The dull roar of hundreds of voices was audible even through the noise-dampening material installed in the walls of the luxury automobile.

"Holy shit," Robert murmured. That pretty well summed up Jason's reaction as well.

"Robert," Claire snapped, glaring at him and gesturing toward the swarm of drones flitting above the crowd, snapping pictures, and capturing video of the group as they exited the vehicle. "Try to behave – just for one day. You don't know what will get recorded." This earned Claire an eye roll in response, but Jason noticed that the engineer shut his mouth and didn't offer any other comments.

A massive crowd had collected outside the building, and the police had erected barricades along the stairwell leading up into the courthouse to keep the people at bay. Jason's attention was focused on the drones that swam through the air above the crowd, their shining lights and cameras angled down on the vehicle. As soon as he stepped out of the car, his face would be broadcast on many different news networks. It was all he could do to stay composed and keep his expression neutral. This hearing was a bigger deal than Jason had expected – which did nothing to help the queasy feeling in his

stomach.

The car slid to a stop at the bottom of the stairwell. Immediately, Cerillion security staff got out of the cars ahead and behind the limo and opened the door, creating a pocket for the group to exit. Jason heard George sigh as he stepped out of the car and surveyed the crowds.

"I expected a turnout, but this is ridiculous," the CEO grumbled, his voice just barely audible above the roar of the crowd. "People's United must have hired protestors to turn this into a spectacle. I'd bet money that Gloria pulled some strings to make that happen." He gestured at the left-hand crowd as he spoke, many of whom were projecting digital signs into the air, the translucent boards shifting and tilting. The messages were all roughly the same. "Our mind is sacred!" one sign shouted. Another read, "Only God should know our thoughts."

"At least some people seem to be supportive," Robert replied as the group started making their way up the steps, flanked by security. He pointed the barricade on the righthand side. "Those people have the right idea." Jason couldn't help but agree. The people on the other side of the barricade were all dressed in street clothes emblazoned with the logo for AO, and their signs held a much more positive message – calling for the game to stay in existence.

I had no idea the game was so popular, Jason thought as he surveyed the hundreds of fans that had come out to support AO. It was one thing to watch a stream online, but to show up at a courthouse to support a video game? That was a much more significant commitment.

Even as he watched the crowd, Jason overheard a reporter near the barricade, a news drone hovering in the air before him. "It seems the group from Cerillion Entertainment has just arrived. And among them appears to be a young man... Jason Rhodes... the same teenager... arrested two weeks ago in a suspected double homicide... Could this be..."

Between the shouting crowds and the fact that his group had kept moving, Jason only caught snippets of what the reporter was saying. Yet the conclusion seemed obvious. If people hadn't drawn the connection between the kid who had killed two teenagers and AO's up-and-coming villain before – then they were definitely making that connection now. He could see an unusual number of eyes watching him on either side of the barricade.

Thankfully, the group made it inside quickly, where they were no longer bombarded by shouts and cameras. At that point, Francis gestured for them to draw close. "Okay, from this point on, try to avoid saying anything unless I tell you to." He stared at Robert during

this statement and the engineer simply smirked in response. “You don’t know who may be recording. This includes places like the bathroom. If people try to draw you into a conversation, then ignore them. Got it?”

Everyone nodded.

A few moments later, the group made it into the courtroom. The hallway outside and the entire seating area was already filled to the brim, dozens of eyes following them as they made their way to their seats near the front of the sitting area. Jason soon discovered that George’s security had cordoned off an area for them, and he sat down beside Robert and Claire. The gallery was separate from the floor of the courtroom by a short wall, two tables placed opposite the bench. Francis and George made their way to one of the counsel tables, and Jason noted that Gloria and several members of her staff already occupied the other table.

For a *regulatory hearing*, this sure felt like a trial. Maybe it was the courtroom setting or the anxious whispering from the sitting area, but Jason was on edge, his hands worrying at his tie. At least he didn’t see his parents in attendance.

“Jason,” someone shouted, and he turned to look back at the gallery. He found Riley waving at him, and he smiled slightly. At least someone here was rooting for him – despite how awkward things had been between them lately. He started to wave back and froze.

Riley had turned to address the young man sitting beside her. He couldn’t have been much older than Jason, sporting sandy hair and a muscular build. Jason noted the way she leaned close to hear what he was saying and the familiar way he placed a hand on her arm. He could feel a heavy weight settle in the pit of his stomach. Maybe this explained why Riley had been acting so odd – perhaps she had simply moved on with someone else. Suddenly, everything made much more sense.

She was interested in someone else.

He turned away quickly, not wanting to see Riley and her *boyfriend* being chummy.

A hand landed on his shoulder. “You’ll be okay,” Robert said, having taken a seat beside him. He had clearly misinterpreted Jason’s sour expression for worry. Claire was sitting on Jason’s other side, quiet and observing the rest of the gallery with an anxious expression. “This is just a bunch of flash and sizzle,” Robert continued. “George and Francis will take care of the heavy lifting.”

“For now,” Jason muttered, his eyes fixing on the bench. In some ways, he was looking forward to the start of the hearing now. At least that might distract him from the unwelcome mental image of Riley and her new friend.

The universe was more than happy to oblige. The door at the back of the room suddenly opened and five suited men and women exited. The room grew quiet as everyone in the gallery focused on the group. The senators took up seats behind the bench, which had been adjusted to accommodate the larger group. A man sat in the center, his hair a speckled gray and brown and spectacles resting on the bridge of his nose. He had the chiseled, smooth jawline of a politician. The senator adjusted the materials on the tabletop in front of him before turning his attention to the rest of the room.

“Alright, I suppose we can get started,” he said, addressing the room. “For those of you who are unfamiliar with me, my name is James Lipton.” He then proceeded to introduce each of the senators seated around him one by one. “Together we form the regulatory committee that oversees the CPSC and several other regulatory bodies.”

He paused to let that sink in. “The objective of this committee is to protect public safety and to consider complaints against consumer products that may represent an undue danger to the general public. Specifically, we are here to discuss the game *Awaken Online* and the related virtual reality hardware and software involved with its use – including the game’s AI controller. This is not a forum for grandstanding or personal vindication,” he added, glancing at Gloria as he made this comment, before turning his attention back to the sitting area.

“We realize that AO has become immensely popular both with the general population and a focus of public interest groups who feel that the technology in the game overreaches,” the senator continued. “Let me be clear to everyone in the gallery. If you disrupt these proceedings, you will be immediately ejected from the premises by court security. No warnings will be given.

“It’s also important for me to explain at the outset that this will not be a conventional committee hearing. As I’m sure you all have noticed, we are hosting a field hearing since the relevant parties are all located in town. After speaking with everyone involved, we have also opted to let Cerillion Entertainment and the CPSC present their cases and call witnesses – similar to a regular civil proceeding – which means that the senators and I will be taking a more passive role in the questioning process.” At this statement, Jason noticed how the senator’s eyes flicked to George for a moment.

Had the CEO called in another favor to make this happen?

James looked at the men and women to either side of him, receiving curt nods in return – indicating that they were ready to begin. “With that out of the way, let’s get started. As an initial step, we will hear opening arguments from both the director of the CPSC,

Gloria Bastion, as well as counsel for Cerillion Entertainment, Francis Rosencrantz. At stake is whether the CPSC shall be permitted to reopen their investigation into AO and its related game system.” The senator glanced at Francis. “Mr. Rosencrantz, you have the floor.”

Francis rose to his feet slowly. “Thank you, Senator Lipton. And please let me thank the committee for the opportunity to address you.” He received nods from the men and women seated by the bench as he made eye contact.

“As Senator Lipton mentioned already, we are all here at the behest of Ms. Bastion, who is concerned that Awaken Online and its related VR hardware and software pose a risk to the public. However, what Mr. Lipton omitted was that the CPSC has already extensively reviewed this product in numerous studies spanning the course of several years.

“*Years*,” Francis repeated for emphasis.

“At no point during this process was there any evidence that the virtual reality headset or the game posed a risk to its users. Does the hardware access a user’s mind? Yes. Does it alter a user’s perception of time? Yes. Does it affect the way a person’s mind interprets and stores sensory and other data? Of course, the answer is yes. These are not new issues. Each and every one of them were raised and studied extensively during the previous trials – showing no ill effects to any of the users who participated in those trials.

“What we do know is that our company has created a revolutionary piece of technology. We have created the first VR environment that is nearly indistinguishable from real life. On top of that, I daresay that we have improved on our reality by providing an extended perception of time – again, something that was studied extensively during the previous trials.

“This technology has taken off like a wild fire,” Francis continued, gesturing at the gallery behind him. “The turnout today is proof of that. Not only does this technology not cause any harm, only a month after release it is already beloved by millions of gamers.”

Francis shook his head sadly. “And yet here we are. After years of testing and the overwhelming popularity of this product, why are we unearthing these same issues again?” He glanced at Gloria’s table, adjusting his glasses with a finger.

“The answer is simple. Fear. Fear is a useful emotion, motivating us toward caution and preparation. Yet it can also be irrational, causing us to chase our tail needlessly and spend hundreds of hours and an exorbitant amount of taxpayer dollars seeking some justification for our *personal* sense of unease. More than that, it can hamper innovation, threatening a product the likes of which the world has never seen before.”

Jason noted that Gloria flinched slightly at Francis' words and he could only wonder why. Perhaps Francis had alluded to her personal vendetta against Jason after what happened with the game master, Florius? That didn't seem quite right, though.

"The testimony and evidence presented over the coming days will show that there is nothing to fear here," Francis declared. "We will show definitively that this game and its related software and hardware do not pose a risk to the public. Thank you."

With that, Francis took his seat. George only spared him a brief glance and kept his expression perfectly neutral. Likely, he knew that he was being carefully scrutinized and the cameras were running.

"Thank you, Mr. Rosencrantz," the senator said. "Now we will hear from Ms. Bastion, who represents the CPSC."

Gloria took this as her cue, rising from her seat to address the committee. She took a moment, glancing down at the desk as though to marshal her thoughts. She began her opening arguments more casually, almost like she was talking to a friend – striking a much different tone to Francis' formal presentation.

"It's interesting how history repeats itself. We've heard those claims before, haven't we? This product is safe. All of the testing has shown that the product won't hurt anyone. On top of that, look at how popular it is! People love it!"

The ordinarily dour woman looked up, meeting the gazes of the committee members. "Over a century ago, they said the same thing about tobacco and asbestos. There was no harm. Testing showed no ill effects. It wasn't until much later that we discovered that the danger was there, but we hadn't known what to look for. How many people suffered from lung cancer? How many died due to our negligence? *Our* inability to see past our excitement and look at a product through the lens of the future.

"Are we overlooking something harmful here with AO and this new virtual reality hardware? With its AI director? Something that might prevent thousands of people from experiencing the same pain and hardship as those before us? Or even something much worse?"

"It is our duty to pose these questions, even if it is inconvenient or entails some additional time and expense," Gloria insisted. "And I know this duty better than most." She glanced at Francis, meeting his eyes. "I know this on a *personal* level.

"Most of you don't know me or my history, but it bears mentioning here. My daughter was two years old when she lost her sight. That was nearly twenty years ago." Gloria smiled sadly, her gaze sweeping back across the gallery. "Many people here probably don't remember the world back then. This was when the first holographic projectors went to market – we were just experiencing the

advent of the technology that would give rise to the Cores that are now strapped to our wrists and our modern pedestals. These products were also being touted as *revolutionary*. And they were!”

“However, to a young child, a holographic light show is like a will-o-wisp, some fanciful creature that needs to be touched and ogled. These devices drew in children like moths to the flame. Unfortunately, these original devices also failed to include safeguards for very young children – who didn’t know not to look directly into the projector.”

“My daughter was among those children,” Gloria continued, her voice becoming slightly ragged and moisture accumulating in her eyes. “As were thousands of others before proper safeguards were put in place. You can’t imagine how much more difficult and painful the lives of those children became due to a mistake – a failure to ask the sort of questions we are tackling today.”

She paused, trying to collect herself before continuing. “This is why this hearing is important. This is why we try to examine products for issues we haven’t foreseen yet. This is why a single set of tests does not always anticipate every problem.

“And testing has failed us here. I’ll admit, every trial we ran during our investigation indicated that AO and the related VR technology was safe. We also extensively reviewed the game’s AI director, which almost exclusively governs the game world. However, it wasn’t until the product hit the market and saw more widespread use that the negative effects have become more apparent.”

Gloria turned to look at Jason, her eyes meeting his. “Do we truly understand the consequences of manipulating our own minds? Are we to believe that granting control of this game system to a new form of AI director will make us safe? Is there any human oversight in this system intended to preserve the wellbeing of the players? Or are our *children* playing a game governed solely by the ‘ghost’ in the machine?

“These are the questions we need to pose here. And we can already see the subtle ways that this game and its AI are beginning to corrupt our children. We have one example sitting among us today and it is our duty to take that example to heart – to make certain that something similar does not happen to others.”

Jason could feel his stomach lurch as Gloria made this statement like a heavy, dead weight had settled there and refused to budge. He was concerned he was going to be sick, and he swallowed against the bile at the back of his throat. It was with growing despair that he listened to her continue.

“We plan to show that AO and its AI director have corrupted a young man, turning him from an honors student at a prestigious

private school to an individual who would spurn his own parents, assault other students, and energetically and enthusiastically commit virtual murder for the public's amusement. And, when the lines blur even further, even kill flesh-and-blood people. This is the game that we are all praising! This is the product that Cerillion Entertainment says will change the future!"

Gloria's gaze dropped back to the ground, her voice quieting. "I implore you to not let the flashing lights blind you from what's important – from our *duty*. Or history is destined to repeat itself, and our descendants will look back on this day and mourn our arrogance. Try to put aside your personal feelings and look to the future as you hear our case – as you hear the story of Jason Rhodes, the self-proclaimed Regent of the Twilight Throne."

Chapter 15 - Guilty

Claire sat alone in her apartment at Cerillion Entertainment, the display on the nearby wall of her living room showing footage from the hearing. The first session had ended several hours ago, and she had gone through the remainder of her duties almost robotically, her mind refusing to focus on her work. She couldn't stop thinking about the hearing – specifically the look on Jason's face as he saw the crowds on the courthouse steps and listened to Gloria's opening statement.

She sank forward on the couch, resting her face in her hands and rubbing at her eyes as though that would somehow wipe away the memories – or alleviate the sense of guilt that rested like an almost palpable weight on her shoulders.

"I did the right thing," she said firmly, her voice echoing in the empty apartment.

Claire knew that she was trying to convince herself.

Before approaching Gloria, things had seemed so clear. Alfred had breached his safety protocols and had gone AWOL, making unilateral changes to the game world, interacting with the players in ways that they had never anticipated, and refusing to communicate with the development team. It was also clear that he had taken an unusual interest in Jason – although she still couldn't see what it was about the boy that drew his attention or what he had hoped to accomplish.

And then there was the night of the breakin – undeniable proof that Alfred had taken a step beyond the pale. He had reached out from the digital world and seized control of Jason's flesh-and-blood body. Claire couldn't see any other way to interpret the data. Alfred had killed two people. Real people that would never come back. It was that act that led her to blowing the whistle to Gloria.

Yet the consequences of that single decision hung heavy upon her mind.

Since providing Gloria with the information she had retrieved from Jason's headset, she had secretly participated in the CPSC's meetings as they prepared for the regulatory hearing. Gloria expected her to be a key witness at the hearing – formally offering her testimony regarding how the company had failed to act on the anomalies detected both during and after the trials, and how Alfred had influenced and eventually taken over Jason's body.

She was Gloria's secret weapon – the linchpin in the hearing

and perhaps the final nail in Cerillion Entertainment's coffin.

During those meetings, Claire had also had the opportunity to read the detective's report from the breakin at Jason's aunt's home. It was that report that had thrown the first wrench into her plans. The teenagers had been armed when they entered the home. The pictures showed that they had completely trashed the place, and, by all accounts, Jason could have been grievously injured. He had no self-defense training and was your typical nerdy teenager – clearly incapable of winning in a knife fight against two assailants while unarmed.

Which led to an obvious question.

“Did Alfred save his life?” she murmured into her hands.

She had been so focused on the ramifications of what Alfred had done in taking over Jason's body, that she had ignored the “why.” Why had the AI felt the need to control Jason? The event didn't seem random. Had the teenagers threatened him? The police report indicated that Jason didn't remember anything from the incident, so that didn't give her any insight. But the question remained unanswered – gnawing at her.

Despite her doubts, she had been able to push forward. At least, until she had seen Jason in person again. At the meeting with George, he had looked even thinner than normal. His expression had almost been despairing as he watched the hearing, despite his obvious attempt to hide his feelings. What must it be like for him? Did he know what had happened with the teenagers? Had he simply woken up standing over two dead bodies – questions swimming through his mind?

And Claire knew what Gloria planned to do – what she had already done. It wouldn't stop with merely ambushing Jason with his parents. Gloria would make a spectacle of Jason – placing him directly in the public eye and revealing every terrible thing he had ever done. The media would likely take this even further, digging up any little detail that they had missed and painting Jason as a villain in the real world. They also had no qualms about exaggerating or fixating on the details that made for a good headline.

Claire wasn't certain when the reality of what she had done finally sunk in. Maybe it was the look on Jason's face during the first session of the hearing – the look of resigned defeat, of fear. They would ruin this kid's life. There was no other way this could end. If Gloria came out victorious in her crusade, Jason might be hospitalized or institutionalized to assess the damage that Alfred had caused. If she failed, things would only be marginally better. Jason would likely still be tried – if not in a court, then in the public eye. Would he forever live with the possible taint that Alfred had turned him into some sort

of closet sociopath?

Even more troubling, at the heart of all these worries rested the same question. Why had Alfred done it? Why?

That question was driving Claire crazy as she second-guessed her decision. The answer either justified what she had done or finally confirmed that she had ruined a boy's life for no reason. Either way, the answer would provide some sense of resolution.

Claire noticed the scene on the nearby TV shift and with a quick command, she increased the volume. A reporter appeared on screen, summarizing the events from the first day of the hearing. The display showed a recording of their small group exiting the courthouse and making their way between the police barricades. The camera zoomed in on Jason's face – his expression nervous. He was clearly trying his best to avoid making eye contact and keep himself calm. In short, he looked like exactly what he was – a teenage kid that had been placed in the middle of a precarious and highly public spectacle.

Claire's heart lurched at the sight. Had she done the right thing?

An errant thought kept nagging at her from the depths of her mind, demanding attention despite her attempts to suppress it. She knew how she could either confirm or deny her fears – she had always known. She had just been too weak – too afraid – to acknowledge it as an option. There was one person who knew exactly what had happened in that house. She just had no way to question him since he refused to talk to her.

Although, she realized that wasn't quite true. Her eyes locked on the image of Jason on screen as he scrambled into the limo. There was a possible way to discover the answers to her questions. She just didn't want to acknowledge that option – in part because she was afraid to hear the answer.

If there was a way to talk to Alfred, it was through Jason.

Chapter 16 - Overgrown

Jason walked down the gloomy streets of the Twilight Throne. The faint green light from the occasional swinging lantern barely pushed back at the ever-present darkness that hung over the city like a blanket. His staff made a rhythmic thump as it struck the cobblestones, the sound echoing off the side of the nearby buildings. Today, he had decided to travel without his entourage. Another assassination attempt was possible, but only Thorn posed a serious risk, and his minions undoubtedly wouldn't help him there.

His thoughts were troubled, fixating on the opening arguments made during the hearing – particularly Gloria's presentation. He hadn't realized that her daughter had been injured, although that started to explain the older woman's relentless attitude toward Cerillion Entertainment, and, in a sort of muddled way, her fascination with Jason.

It was her confidence that stuck with him, though. Jason had been assuming that she was fishing – harassing him into flipping on Cerillion Entertainment. Now, after recalling the look in her eye and her story, he had his doubts. She didn't strike him as the sort of person who acted blindly. That thought terrified him. What exactly did she know? Did she have proof? The unanswered questions swam and spun through his mind in a whirlwind.

Several undead passed him, and he tugged at his hood, the habitual gesture pointless with the way his cloak magically concealed his face. Perhaps this little field trip would help divert his attention from his troubles. Jason would be attempting the challenge right now, but Riley wasn't online – likely spending time with her new *friend* or something. He immediately tried to bury that thought. Every time he thought about Riley, it felt like someone had punched him in the stomach.

His destination soon came into view. He stood in the northeastern corner of the city, where a steep hill towered into the night air, framed by the thick stone wall that surrounded the city. He could only surmise that this area had once been a "public" garden – placed conveniently near the palatial estates of the former nobles. All that was left after the conversion to the Twilight Throne was a dusty hill that loomed over the desiccated husks of the buildings to the south.

Approaching the mound, Jason saw that a tunnel had been burrowed into the side, the entrance all but invisible unless you knew

where to look. Wooden beams framed the opening, lending support and preventing the hill from collapsing on top of the opening. Without hesitation, he entered the tunnel – his *Night Vision* allowing him to avoid running into the walls despite the lack of light. The path took a steep winding path downward, traveling several stories before it terminated at a heavy iron door – its frame buried deeply in the dirt on either side of the tunnel.

Good. Cecil has been taking precautions, Jason thought. The little man had also done an excellent job of concealing the tunnel entrance. There was little or no evidence topside that they were hard at work below ground.

He rapped harshly against the door, the sound echoing through the subterranean cavern. A slit in the center of the door slid open with the harsh rasp of scraping metal, and a pair of white eyes stared back at him. “It’s Jason, let me in,” he ordered the man, pulling back his hood to reveal his horns and pale, tattooed skin. At least there was one advantage to his new body – it made him easy to identify.

The man’s eyes widened in shock and Jason heard the sound of gears grinding, a series of solid thumps signaling that deadbolts were being levered to the side. As the noise sputtered out, the heavy door creaked open with painstaking slowness. As soon as he had enough space, Jason stepped through. Multiple weapons were pointed in his direction – an entire division of Kin having been posted to guard the doorway. Behind him, the heavy door was already being pushed back into place. It took three undead to budge the portal.

Jason waved off the troops, who relaxed as they saw his familiar appearance. He glanced behind him at the door, admiring the network of gears and deadbolts that had been installed on the interior side.

Okay, maybe that’s a little overkill, Jason thought to himself.

He then turned to inspect the cavern, and immediately froze in shock. When Cecil had shown him the bill, he had been a bit skeptical, but he had decided to trust the small engineer – he certainly had Riley’s ringing endorsement. It had cost him a healthy portion of the funds <Original Sin> had accumulated, but they needed to develop some sort of product that they could sell if the city was to survive.

It seemed that Cecil had delivered.

A truly massive cavern now rested below the Twilight Throne, its ceiling stretching nearly thirty feet into the air and the floor of the cavern spanning at least 150 yards. The entrance rested atop a small hill, a path winding down into the cavern proper – yet it afforded Jason a great view of the enclosure. Several areas had been cordoned off by wooden fencing, freshly tilled soil resting between the neat rows. On the far end of the cave, Jason could just make out the pale

forms of the mole-kin continuing to dig and excavate the cavern.

“Ahh, Jason,” a gruff voice called out, and Jason looked down to find Cecil approaching. The small man wiped dirt on his trousers before offering his hand in greeting. “I wasn’t expecting you, or I would have met you outside.”

“Perhaps it’s for the best,” Jason replied. “We should try to keep this place under wraps, especially with Thorn at large.” He winced at his inadvertent pun, an image of the cloth-covered man appearing in his mind’s eye.

Cecil nodded, gesturing at the door. “I’m sure you’ve noticed some of my security arrangements. It would take a group of mages to make it through that blast door.”

Jason snorted. “Yes, it’s a... *considerable* door. So how else have you been spending my money?”

Cecil’s mouth stretched into a grin, pulling at the wrinkles of his face. It might have been the first time he had seen the engineer smile – without anything exploding anyway. “Why don’t I give you the tour!”

He started off down into the cavern, setting a hurried pace as he gave his report. “First off, we’ve been calling this place ‘The Grove.’ We’ve excavated most of the main cavern, and those dirty rat creatures are nearly finished on the far end. Eliza assures me that she doesn’t need much more space than this – at least until we assess the growth rate of her plants and the demand for the product.

“As you can see,” he continued, pointing at the ceiling of the cavern, “we’ve attempted to simulate sunlight to allow the plants to grow naturally.” Jason could see that hundreds of orbs floated near the cavern’s ceiling, each one glowing with white light. The effect was rather strange, almost like they were experiencing muted daylight below ground.

“How’d you manage that?” Jason asked. In his experience, light mages were somewhat rare in the Twilight Throne. Perhaps he had purchased the globes.

Cecil snorted in amusement. “I made them. Took a massive amount of light mana, but you’d be surprised what people are willing to do if you offer sufficient incentive.” When he saw Jason’s raised eyebrow, he elaborated, “We... negotiated with a few travelers with the skill set we needed. It only took them a few minutes to see reason, and we released them outside the city when we were finished. No one was harmed too badly.”

Jason wasn’t sure whether to reprimand the engineer or commend him. It sounded like the small man had kidnapped several players, but on the other hand, he couldn’t ignore the results. He’d just make a mental note that he was probably going to be accused of

kidnapping at some point. He could add it to the growing list of grievances.

“Anyway,” Cecil said as they walked among the carefully partitioned fields. “The result is effective.” He started to say something else and then caught sight of a figure walking among the fields, occasionally leaning over to grab handfuls of soil. Cecil immediately made a beeline towards the girl.

“Eliza, Jason’s here!” he called as they neared. She looked up in surprise, her eyes going wide, and she accidentally dropped the soil in her hand. She was wearing a simple cloth tunic and trousers, the material stained from work.

“Oh, h-hi,” Eliza greeted them as they approached. “I-I didn’t realize you were coming,” she added, addressing Jason.

“It’s fine,” Jason replied with a smile, trying his best to put the timid girl at ease. “Cecil was just giving me the tour.”

“There’s not much to see yet,” Cecil said with a grunt, then fixed his attention on Eliza. “It’s almost like someone needs to actually plant something. Now might even be a good time to get started, wouldn’t you say?”

Eliza looked startled, glancing down at a bag clutched in her other hand. “I’m not sure...”

“Go on, girl,” Cecil insisted. “You’ve gotta do it sometime, so why not now?”

Jason might be socially inept – his conversations with Riley had clearly proven that to him – but he could still pick up on the tension between the pair. Eliza didn’t seem keen on the idea of planting their first crop, although Jason didn’t understand why. He decided to keep his mouth shut for the moment.

When Cecil saw Eliza still standing indecisively, he sighed. Before she could react, he grabbed the bag out of her hands and ripped open the top. Inside, rested a mound of seeds. Without further ado, he grabbed a handful and tossed them across the empty field, the tiny objects bouncing and tumbling along the dirt.

“Okay, now you either need to do your thing, or you’ll let the seeds go to waste,” the dwarf said curtly, handing the slightly lighter bag back to Eliza.

She stared at Cecil in shock for a long moment, a strange mixture of emotions flashing across her face. She seemed to land on anger, her expression transforming in a flash as her irises turned a vibrant blue. Within only a few seconds, it was hard to imagine that the glaring, magic-laden woman in front of them was the same person. “I wasn’t ready to plant them yet,” she said to Cecil, her voice eerily calm. “I was trying to find a field with the right conditions for Ferntail. It has particular soil requirements.”

Cecil seemed unperturbed by her reaction and her new demeanor. He shrugged. "Looks good enough to me. If I left you to your own devices, we'd all be long dead before you planted a single damn seed. Now you don't have any excuses."

Eliza seemed like she was about to say something, but she must have thought better of it. "Fine..."

She turned back to the field, her arms stretching wide. As Jason watched, arcane words spilled from her lips, and her body began to glow with a faint sapphire light. The mana collected in a mist around her, growing thicker until it condensed and collected into droplets along her skin. Within only moments, her arms were coated in what appeared to be liquid mana.

Eliza took a tentative step forward through the field, shaking her arms gently and causing droplets of mana to drip down onto the soil. As the energy struck the earth, something fascinating happened. Small shoots and tendrils began to break through the dirt – growing at a rate that seemed impossible. As Eliza stepped through the field, plants sprouted and bloomed behind her, their branches stretching into the air hungrily.

Within only a few minutes, an entire row of plants stood behind the girl, and her body returned to normal. As she glanced behind herself and saw the fresh stalks, a small, delighted smile bloomed across her face. She immediately began calling her mist, the moisture washing back across the field and watering her new plants.

"How...?" Jason murmured in shock.

Cecil nodded from where he stood nearby. "The girl can accelerate the growth of plants. Fun little secret she's been keeping, huh? With that ability, we could grow an entire crop within days. It drains soil nutrients and water like the plants are starving, but it can certainly get us started. If only she weren't so damn nervous about using the ability."

"Do you know why she's reluctant?" Jason asked.

"No idea and she wouldn't tell me," he grunted in reply. "I don't suggest pressing her on it. I get the impression that something bad happened the last time she used it." He shook his head. "Maybe little events like this will get her to relax – even if I have to twist her arm to make them happen. Honestly, it takes a force of nature to get that girl to act."

Eliza returned a few moments later. She seemed much more relaxed, and a small smile still lit her face. She had always talked about how much she missed her garden and working with Alma, but Jason hadn't quite appreciated how much she enjoyed it.

"That was pretty awesome," he said with a smile of his own. "You've been holding out on us!"

“It’s not quite as easy as it looks,” she demurred, looking back at her new plants. “I can’t keep that up forever. Just that one session drained my whole mana pool.” She hesitated. “Plus, sometimes the spell can have... unforeseen consequences.”

Jason’s brow furrowed slightly at that comment, and he spared a glance at Cecil, who just shrugged. He had no idea what Eliza meant, but her expression spoke volumes. This seemed like an incredibly useful ability, and she had to realize that. Maybe Cecil was right to think she’d had some sort of mishap with the spell. He was curious, but he didn’t think pressing Eliza was the best way to find answers. He decided to take the engineer’s advice and not push it – at least for now.

“Well, at least you can jumpstart our operation. Speaking of which, what are you going to do once you have your first load of ingredients? Do we have an alchemy lab set up yet?”

“We’re working on it, but we’re not quite there,” Cecil said with another frown. “The merchants in town didn’t have a lot of the equipment that Eliza required, and we have a few other problems...” The engineer shared a look with Eliza.

“Like what?” Jason asked when he trailed off. He could sense bad news coming.

“We’ll need supplies,” Eliza piped up timidly, not quite looking him in the eye. “Mostly vials, but there are also some materials that I can’t grow easily. For example, there are certain types of algae that are fantastic catalysts. Alma, my teacher, used to buy these things from the market in Falcon’s Hook or grow them herself, but I’m having trouble finding them from the merchants here.”

Jason grimaced as he realized why they looked guilty. He expected that this was going to be expensive, especially if they wanted to mass produce the potions. “Maybe I can check the player auction house. If you can make me a list, I’ll see what I can get for you.”

“Thank you,” Eliza said quietly.

“No, thank *you*. If we can get this operation off the ground, we may be able to sell your potions across most of the game world,” Jason replied. At some point, he would have to discuss splitting the profits, but that should probably wait until he was able to calculate the unit cost of each potion and set a price.

Assuming anyone even wants to buy them, he thought glumly. Eliza’s potions were amazing, but they were still taking a big chance here. And luck certainly hadn’t seemed to be working in his favor lately.

The conversation soon petered out, and Eliza went back to work – swiftly draining the contents of a mana potion in a single swallow. She seemed a bit more relaxed with using her strange spell

now that nothing had gone wrong the first time. She had begun planting seeds and walking up and down the fields, sapphire droplets dripping from her outstretched arms and a blanket of vegetation sprouting in her wake. It was a strange sight.

Cecil coughed to get Jason's attention. "So, what do you think?"

"I'm hoping this works," Jason replied quietly.

He had devoted most of their financial resources to this project, and if it didn't pan out, he would be scrambling to fund something else – assuming he could come up with another idea to make money. Just like everything else that he was dealing with, he would have to cross his fingers – or perhaps say a prayer to the Dark One. He could certainly use all the divine assistance he could get right now.

Chapter 17 - Determined

After finishing up with Cecil and Eliza, Jason returned to the training room below the dark keep. He spent the next few hours in-game training. He needed to do something – anything – to feel productive and get his mind off his problems. Besides, he still had a long way to go to reach Thorn's level, or even somewhere close.

He ducked the dummy's next swing and immediately spun, using his staff to block a blow from behind. The weapon jerked hard in his hand as the dummy struck. Without pausing, Jason immediately dropped a hand, summoning three bone shields from the nearby pile he had hauled in from the challenge room. He used the discs to block the next series of blows in rapid succession, momentarily stunning the dummies and filling the air with ivory dust as the shields exploded.

Capitalizing on the opportunity, Jason swept forward, his staff slamming into the marked areas on the wooden constructs' heads and limbs. As soon as his weapon struck, they went limp, the magic that kept them running swiftly fleeing their artificial bodies. As Jason stood in the center of the still training room, white dust drifted slowly toward the ground. His ragged breathing was the only sound in the room.

He drew himself out of his defensive stance and forced his muscles to relax, using his sleeve to wipe at the sweat that had collected on his forehead. He glanced at the timer beside him, noting that it had taken him 63 seconds that time. He was getting better. Not a lot better, but at least he wasn't completely embarrassed by his performance. Rex had assured him he could complete the sparring area in under 20 seconds – although Jason was skeptical that he could pull that off.

Maybe if I could destroy the dummies in a single swing...

Not that he had anything that could do that sort of damage. Even with his enhanced stats and the improvement of his combat skills, his damage with the staff was lousy. He had come to discover that the base damage of a weapon was just the starting point. In some ways, how that damage was modified by the player's *Strength* and *Dexterity* was more important – allowing the power of a weapon to scale up considerably. Precision strikes and blocking added yet another complication on top of that, with strikes to weak points causing considerably more damage.

Jason pulled up the weapon information again, scanning the item description carefully.

Call of the Dead

This staff appears to be crafted from some unknown obsidian substance. Upon close inspection, runes are engraved along the shaft in addition to the scrollwork. You get the unmistakable feeling that this weapon harbors a secret, although the feeling is elusive and difficult to pin down. Perhaps there is something yet to be discovered about the staff.

Quality: A

Durability: 94/100

Damage: 11-35 (Blunt)

+ 20 Willpower

+ 10 Intelligence

+ 10 Vitality

+ 1 to all active and passive dark magic skills

(Soulbound)

Even the tooltip for the weapon indicated that it was capable of something more. All the orange items they had previously encountered had some sort of special effect or ability. He just had no idea how he was supposed to unlock the staff's latent power. Riley's bow, for example, had required a full-fledged quest. Hopefully, that wasn't the case here. Perhaps he would learn more as he made his way through the challenges – assuming he and Riley ever completed the first room, of course.

Letting out a frustrated sigh, Jason pulled up his notifications. Maybe his skill and stat increases would make him feel better.

x2 Skill Rank Up: Staff Combat

Skill Level: Intermediate Level 1

Effect 1: 10% Increased damage and accuracy.

Effect 2: 1% Increased speed and reaction time.

x2 Skill Rank Up: Mana Mastery

Skill Level: Intermediate Level 3

Effect 1: -7% Mana Cost.

Effect 2: 2% Faster Cast Rate.

x3 Skill Rank Up: Dodge

Skill Level: Intermediate Level 2

Effect 1: 6.0% Increased speed and reaction time.

Effect 2: 1.4% bonus to Dexterity.

Stat Increases:

+ 2 Strength
+ 7 Dexterity
+ 3 Endurance

He grimaced as he saw his stat gains. They had slowed markedly over the last couple of days in-game. He could only guess that the game placed some sort of “soft cap” on training even before he hit a hard limit. That, or he needed to find more extreme ways to train.

Jason’s gaze lingered on the skill notifications for a moment, noting that he had unlocked the intermediate effects for most of his combat skills now. The changes were small, but the reaction speed increase provided by *Staff Combat* and *Dodge* seemed to stack, and the effect was noticeable. It made the weapon incredibly adept at defensive combat. He still had problems dishing out damage, but he could block and dodge like a champ.

Just as he swiped away his notifications, he saw Riley enter the training area. A familiar hollow weight settled in his stomach, and he tried to look busy resetting the sparring area – like he hadn’t just noticed her walk inside.

Seeing her again, Jason’s thoughts immediately returned to the image of her sitting beside that other guy. He watched Riley out of the corner of his eye as he worked, noticing the way her blonde hair tumbled across her shoulders. She was beautiful. How could he have thought he was ever in her league?

“Hi, Jason,” Riley greeted him as she moved towards the doorway leading into the challenge area. The portal stood wide open since Jason frequently needed to enter the room to train his new abilities. She glanced at him tentatively before adding, “I-I’m sorry I had to leave the hearing early. Caleb needed my help with something.”

Jason winced as she said his name. For some reason, not knowing his name had seemed better – like he wasn’t quite real. But no, the asshole even had a cool name. Knowing his luck, he was probably an awesome guy too. Jason couldn’t help but hate him.

“It’s okay,” Jason said, turning away from her. “It droned on for a while, so you didn’t miss anything.”

“That Gloria lady really seems to be gunning for you,” Riley commented. “At least from what I saw.”

He knew she was trying to be sympathetic, but her comment

still stung – since he knew she didn't really care. He immediately regretted that thought. That wasn't fair to Riley at all. Just because she had her new friend to occupy her time and attention, didn't mean that she didn't care about Jason. She had come to the hearing, after all. If anything, that petty thought just made him feel even worse.

Damn it. I can't even be mad at her, he thought, frustration simmering in his veins.

Jason shrugged. He needed to change the subject. "I guess, but I can't do anything about that right now. Are you ready to try the challenge again?" he asked quickly, stepping through the doorway and into the challenge area.

Riley's brow creased in a frown as she watched him. "Sure," she answered, before jogging to catch up. "Are you okay?"

No, I'm not.

"I'm fine," Jason answered, tugging at the hood so that she couldn't see his pained expression. "There's a lot going on. I just want to focus on something else – anything else. Smashing our head against this challenge seems like a good start."

Riley didn't seem convinced, but she didn't press him. Instead, Jason smacked his palm against the orb on the center pillar. Rex soon appeared nearby, his eyes taking a moment to fix on the pair. "Ahh, ready for a second try?" he asked in a lighthearted voice.

"Yes," Jason said curtly. "Let's do it."

The former general glanced at Jason in surprise, cocking his head slightly. Then he looked back and forth between Jason and Riley, noting their tense posture and the concerned expression on Riley's face. "Uh huh. Are you going to try to mix it up this time? It doesn't seem like you've resolved some of the *issues* from your previous attempt."

Jason simply stared at the skeletal man, catching the implication of what he was saying. Rex knew he hadn't mended things with Riley. Well, tough. He had no interest in hearing about her new boyfriend or going over how she had rejected him for someone else. He would do anything to avoid talking about Caleb – including, but not limited to, getting torn apart by a horde of undead.

"We're good," Jason said finally. "Just start it up."

Rex didn't look happy with that answer. "Fine, good luck!" he said, before waving a hand. He abruptly disappeared into a cloud of smoke that streamed back into the orb resting atop the pillar.

Challenge 1: A Trial of Bone has been initiated.

The familiar voices drifted through the room, signaling the beginning of the challenge.

Jason didn't bother looking at Riley as he spoke, gripping his staff in anticipation. "As soon as the skeletons start to appear, we're going to rush to the far wall and keep it at our backs. I'll hold off the front line. You stay behind me and snipe."

Riley glanced at him with a questioning look but didn't say anything.

Only a few seconds later, the bones around them began to tremble, and then dance along the ground before rising into the air. Tendrils of dark mana lashed at the ivory substance, pulling the bones together and beginning to form a new pack of Death Knights.

"Now," Jason shouted, not waiting for the summoning process to complete. Instead, he sprinted toward the distant wall – dodging the whirlwind of bones that now whipped through the air. He didn't bother to see if Riley was following him.

As he ran, Jason used the opportunity to summon his bone shields and his *Bone Armor*, his free hand darting through the requisite gestures as arcane words spilled from his lips. It was a struggle to cast a spell while running – his concentration being pulled in multiple directions – but he had been practicing diligently over the last few days and had begun to master the technique.

Bones sprouted from Jason's body, the substance seeping through his skin before settling atop his leather armor. The plating soon wound up his arms in thick plates, forming heavy pauldrons at his shoulders before running down his chest and spine. The bones also materialized along his legs, reinforcing his greaves and boots. He had found that the upgraded version of his *Bone Armor* covered more of his body, but at the cost of some flexibility and speed. It wasn't that the bones were heavy – quite the opposite actually – but they did restrict his movements.

Within seconds, Jason hit the wall and spun. He saw that Riley had listened to him and was hot on his heels, automatically taking up a position behind him and drawing her bow. Jason spared a glance to either side, noting the towering piles of bone flanking them. He had chosen this location after carefully inspecting the room. It placed a stone wall at their rear, and the ivory mounds would force the Death Knights to funnel. None of the crystalline columns were nearby, so it would be difficult for the room to drop Night Children on their heads.

The thunder of bones striking the floor echoed through the room. Nearly two dozen Death Knights barreled toward their position,

their tails lashing at the air as they charged. Riley didn't wait for them to engage, her bow humming as she released a stream of arrows into the oncoming horde. Her *Void Arrows* slammed into exposed knees and limbs, blasting the bones apart. More than one Death Knight toppled to the ground, their skeletal bodies scraping against the stone floor.

However, the group of undead seemed to anticipate her tactic. The front line promptly lowered their shields, forming a veritable wall of bone that hampered her missiles. "Get up on the pile," Jason ordered, gesturing to the mound beside them.

She glanced at him in confusion as she kept firing. "But, Rex..." she began.

"Just do it," Jason snapped, not waiting for her to finish. They didn't have time to argue.

Riley came to a decision and jumped up on the nearby mound, stumbling slightly as she landed on the shifting surface. Then she turned her attention back to the Death Knights who were closing quickly; her new vantage point allowed her to fire overtop the shield wall.

Now was the tricky part. The Death Knights were at their most dangerous in an open charge, using their weight and spiked shields to slam into a target. Jason had some firsthand experience with that tactic. After that, they were primarily meat shields. Their regular attacks were relatively slow and cumbersome, and their tails were difficult to use if an opponent wasn't standing behind them. If they could break this first charge, they would have a chance.

Jason moved forward a few feet to give himself some space. He held his staff tightly in his hands as three bone shields orbited him slowly. He would need to clear his mind for this next part. There wouldn't be any room for stray thoughts. He would need to be ready to *react*. His dark mana pulsed through his veins, and he clung to the numbing sensation as he took several deep, calming breaths – his gaze fixated on the undead thundering toward him.

The Death Knights were close now, only a few feet away, but still, he waited.

Not yet.

They were only inches away now, his *Dodge* skill slowing their movements imperceptibly – urging him to leap to the side. He could feel the tips of their spiked shields beginning to pierce his armor.

Now!

Jason finished casting *Dark Incarnation* just as the Death Knights were about to slam into his fragile form. His body swiftly became incorporeal, his limbs and torso billowing out into a cloud of dark smoke. The undead raced through him, slamming headlong into

the stone wall with a thunderous crash of bone. The momentum of the second line carried them forward into their brothers, their shields destroying what little remained of the first wave even as they crushed their own shields against the unmoving wall. The third wave managed to backpedal away from the wall in time, but they were caught off balance.

Immediately deactivating his spell, Jason's body assumed its familiar weight. A handful of Death Knights still lingered behind him, flanked by the two massive piles of bone – the rest were nothing more than broken bones and dust. The survivors lashed out at Jason with their whip-like tails as he rematerialized, the blows intercepted by his staff. After his prolonged training, the weapon now blurred as he spun and dodged the lightning-fast attacks. The force of the blows knocked him back slightly and gave the Death Knights room to recover and turn.

It also placed their backs to Riley – who used the opportunity to blow them apart in a shower of debris and malignant energy. Jason immediately moved back into position, putting his back to the wall as he faced the remaining mass of Death Knights collecting in front of him. However, now that he had blunted their initial charge, his enemies found their movements hampered as they tried to funnel into the narrow space between the two mounds of bones, their bulky forms working against them.

Jason held his position: dodging, ducking, and weaving as his staff danced and spun. He conjured bone shields as rapidly as he could, using the discs to block the occasional blow as he parried the Death Knights' attacks. Meanwhile, Riley blew apart the undead from her position nearby. She used her *Void Arrows* sparingly to prevent Jason from getting overwhelmed and to avoid needlessly draining her own health.

They just needed to keep this up for however long the trial lasted. Although, that was easier said than done. Jason's stamina was already depleting. He spared a glance at the group menu in the corner of his vision, noticing that Riley's health was almost at half – the archer's natural regeneration unable to keep pace with the cost of her *Void Arrows*.

Suddenly, the room changed tactics.

The Death Knights broke apart in a flurry of bones, Jason's last blow passing through the air as the skeleton dissolved before his eyes. "Shit," he murmured, taking a few steps back to avoid being speared by the stray bones that now whipped through the room. He could at least use the opportunity to recover some of his waning stamina.

"Riley, down here," he grunted, gesturing at the archer.

Jason wasn't really getting hit, and he didn't have a good way

to spend his mana. In contrast, Riley was already low on health and likely wouldn't last for the rest of the fight. He needed to try to fix that, but, of course, he was going to have to gamble. Again.

She dropped down lightly, her boots scuffing against the hard, stone floor. Jason gestured to one of her arrows. "Stab me with an arrow. Use *Blood Mist*," he said, consciously de-summoning the bone armor around his left shoulder.

Riley stared at him for a moment, her eyes a solid black with a circle of red in the center – evidence that she was constantly channeling her mana. She hesitated for a moment before grabbing an arrow from her quiver, the bolt shining a brilliant crimson. Then she stabbed it into his flesh. Jason let out a hissing breath as pain bloomed in his shoulder.

A notification appeared in his peripheral vision.

-103 Damage

Bleeding: -80 damage per second.

Limb Damage: reaction speed reduced by 15%.

Several long seconds later, a red mist began to creep through the air, growing increasingly dense as it accumulated around Jason. It seemed that the game still registered him as a flesh-and-blood creature even with his health converted to mana. Good. The cloud could help regenerate some of Riley's waning health, and the cost to Jason was relatively small, the bleeding effect only chipping away at his health pool after accounting for his regen. The restricted movement in his shoulder was irritating, but not insurmountable.

The room apparently decided their reprieve was over. The maelstrom of bone that had been collecting had formed into a veritable army of Night Children, dozens of glowing black eyes now staring at them from around the room. The creatures hung from the nearby columns and skittered along the ground, occasionally dragging their claws against the stone floor which created a shower of sparks in their wake as their malevolent, dark orbs stared at the pair hungrily.

The two groups watched each other warily, neither making a move as the moment stretched on interminably. And then both groups moved simultaneously. The horde of Night Children surged forward in a wave, their clawed hands tearing at the air as they raced toward the pair. Meanwhile, Jason lunged forward to fill the gap between the two mounds of bone, creating a pocket for Riley behind him.

Jason blocked a pair of claws with his staff, whipping it in an arc to smash the other end into a Night Child's face – the bone fracturing and splitting apart. He caught movement in his peripheral

vision, time slowing slightly as he saw a Night Child lunge from the nearby mound. His arm came up, the boned ridges intercepting the blow and causing a shower of ivory dust. Then the skeleton was blown apart as an arrow smashed into it. Riley's next two shots took out the creatures climbing over the mound behind her last target before she shifted her attention back to the main group. He could trust her to cover his flanks.

Despite any other problems they might have, Riley had always had his back.

He immediately whirled back to the oncoming group, his staff spinning and his bone shields fluttering around him rapidly. It took every ounce of concentration he had to keep the waves of creatures at bay. Riley's *Void Arrows* occasionally created a pocket for a few precious seconds, just long enough to let Jason's waning stamina keep up. The *Blood Mist* was also barely allowing her to keep casting as Jason endured most of the enemy's assault.

For a moment, Jason thought that they might be able to keep up this precarious dance until the challenge ended, but then the room threw them another curve ball. A bolt of dark energy suddenly raced through the air and crashed into Jason's unprotected arm where he had ward off the Night Child. The energy ate into his flesh at an alarming rate, and he let out a scream of pain, momentarily dropping his guard.

A pair of claws skittered across the armor on his thigh, scoring deep grooves in the bone. Riley stepped forward, her daggers flashing and ending the creature's life as she picked up Jason's position in the chokepoint between the two bone mounds. This gave Jason a second to recover, the dark mana beginning to dissipate and leaving ruined flesh in its wake.

He didn't have time to dwell on the injury, and his eyes scanned the room for his attacker. He soon found the creature, its six legs clinging to a crystalline column as its ruined maw readied another blast of obsidian energy. It seemed the room had created a variant of his *Venom Spitters*, filling their stomachs with dark energy instead of acid. Dozens more were skittering across the room, taking up positions on the crystalline columns to bombard the pair.

"Damn it," Jason muttered, shifting his bone shields to protect them. Obsidian energy soon crashed into the ivory discs, eating into their surface at a frightening pace. "Riley, there are *Venom Spitters* on the columns! You'll need to focus on them. Get ready to switch," he called. Riley could only spare a brief nod of acknowledgment as she continued to fend off the Night Children.

"Switch!" Jason yelled, and they swiftly traded positions. Jason swung his staff in a wide arc as he stepped forward, slamming two of

the small gray creatures aside and allowing Riley to pull back.

If Jason had trouble concentrating before, he was nearly overwhelmed now – acting more on instinct and reflex than conscious thought. His bone shields hovered nearby, blocking the occasional spray of dark energy. His staff spun and danced through the air, blocking and slaying the Night Children as fast as he could. He was a flurry of motion, pushing himself well past his breaking point. At some point, he depleted his stamina and began drawing on his own health pool – his movements slowing further as pain wracked his limbs.

Between his injuries and his weakening body, more of the Night Children's blows were landing, tearing apart his *Bone Armor*. The occasional blow sunk into his flesh, causing black blood to spray into the air and stain his pale skin. Yet he didn't have time to re-summon the armor.

He refused to give up. He kept going, fighting through the pain and weakness. Ignoring the red notifications that were flashing in his peripheral vision, his field of vision funneled until all he saw was the weaving mass of bone that continuously crashed against him. He could only hope that Riley was still fighting behind him.

Sheer will and stubbornness weren't enough.

The weakness refused to be ignored. His legs gave out, and Jason sunk to his knees on the hard, stone floor. He kept his staff moving and continued frantically summoning his bone shields, barely intercepting the blows that rained down on him as he neared his end. The notifications were even more insistent now – letting him know that his death was imminent.

As Jason's health began to redline, he heard a scream behind him. Two bolts of black energy had slammed into Riley's chest, as Jason failed to intercept the missiles in time. The energy ate into her armor and skin hungrily, her lifeblood dripping down her stomach. She toppled to the ground, her eyes now vacant and lifeless.

Dead. Riley's dead.

The thought was fuzzy and difficult to focus on. Yet the importance still sunk home. He felt anger well from deep within himself, feeding on the pain and frustration he had endured for the last few days. The endless, relentless training. The hearing with Gloria. The look on his parents' faces. And then his thoughts centered on Riley's vacant eyes.

He wouldn't lose here.

He couldn't.

But it was futile. He was out of tricks, and his health was beginning to bottom out – even as his strength failed him. There was no magical solution to his problem, and no one was coming to bail

him out of this situation. He looked up into the wave of claws descending upon him, dozens of darkly glowing eyes staring at his broken and bleeding body dispassionately. Jason closed his eyes to blot out the image even as Alfred's words echoed in his mind.

"This world isn't fair."

He was starting to agree,

Strangely, a few long moments passed, and Jason was still alive. No claws ripped into his flesh, and no taunting blue notification had appeared in front of him. He tentatively opened his eyes to find that the army of Night Children had simply collapsed to the ground, their bones scattered across the room. The Venom Spitters had similarly dropped from their perches, their bodies crashing against the floor to the sound of cracking bone.

And then a familiar array of voices resounded through the room.

Challenge 1: A Trial of Bone has been completed.

Congratulations, challengers!

Chapter 18 - Hopeless

Frank rode astride one of the skeletal wolves. The creatures' paws rhythmically pounded the dirt as the remainder of their force rode through the dark forest. Vera was beside him, the undead general's eyes skimming the road and nearby tree line carefully as they advanced. They needed to be cautious since their numbers had dwindled. They had left a full division back at the nest, tasked with breaking apart the den of bones and transporting the materials back to the Twilight Throne. Hopefully, Jason could come up with an idea for how to use the bones more constructively.

The last few days in-game had been largely uneventful – filled with the logistics associated with deconstructing the nest and then traveling toward the first town directly west from the Twilight Throne. There hadn't been any more encounters with the wild undead, although that didn't curb Frank's fears. If anything, things had been too quiet. Although, perhaps he was just used to a bit more death and mayhem in his adventures with Jason. His friend had become a lightning rod for conflict lately.

As the group rounded a bend in the road, the advance line slowed. A wall loomed in the distance, signaling that they must have arrived at their destination. Even at this distance, Frank could pick out torches along the wall, the orange lights standing out like beacons amid the heavy darkness that hung over the forest. Despite his enhanced vision, some primitive part of Frank's mind looked forward to seeing real light again.

Vera immediately gestured for the undead to leave the road, the wolves filtering among the trees. Frank moved to join her by nudging his wolf forward with his knees. He could understand the undead woman's caution in moving into the forest. They didn't know what to expect with these towns – or how much resistance they might encounter in order to complete the goal Jason had set for them.

"That must be Fastu," Vera noted as Frank approached. She gestured to one of the soldiers, and they handed her a telescoping eyeglass – another of Cecil's devices. The engineer had been forced to install a light-mana crystal to make the device work in the gloomy haze of the Twilight Throne. She peered through the lens with one of her bleached-white eyes. "They have constructed a rough wooden palisade around the perimeter which appears to be about ten feet tall. Ramps must be constructed along the interior since I see guards patrolling some sort of rampart."

Her brow furrowed in confusion for a moment. "What is it?" Frank asked.

"There are quite a few guards – more than I would have expected," Vera commented. She tossed the eyepiece to one of the Kin. "This town seems to be on high alert – against what I'm not sure."

"Perhaps the wild undead? Like those we fought in the woods?" Frank asked. He hesitated for a moment. "Although, I suppose we haven't seen much evidence of native undead this far from the city."

"My thoughts exactly," Vera replied with a curt nod. "The best we can do is be careful. The larger question then is how we wish to approach this town. Do we kill them all immediately or do we try to resolve this more peacefully?"

Frank wavered as Vera gave him an expectant look – almost like she was quizzing him. His gaze dropped to his hands as he considered their options. If they approached the town, then they would give up the element of surprise. They had already lost Kin in the battle with the Wraithlings, and he didn't wish to lose more. It wasn't just that it was difficult to replace the soldiers, they were also just too real for Frank's liking. His thoughts returned to the way the Kin salvaged parts of their own dead. A part of him recoiled at the idea of killing innocent villagers in cold blood, even if it might come to that eventually, either here or with the other towns.

He couldn't help but ask himself what Jason would do. He'd probably come up with some clever speech as he had in Peccavi or trick the entire village into leaving... or... something. It had always been that way when the pair played together. Jason came up with their plans, and Frank executed them. Yet, Jason wasn't here this time. Frank would have to make his own decision, and his gut told him to try the peaceful option.

"I'd like to try talking to them first," Frank offered, glancing at Vera. "If nothing else, we might discover why they are on guard. Since we already suspect that someone is messing with the natural balance among the native undead, it wouldn't hurt to investigate."

"Fair enough," Vera answered, eyeing him with a considering expression.

I just hope this is the right approach, he thought.

Not wasting any time, Vera immediately turned and began barking orders. A handful of the undead were instructed to encircle the camp and act as sentries. The remainder would come with Vera and Frank. The last thing they needed was to be caught alone at the palisade with a miniature army of archers aiming at them.

Much too soon for Frank's liking, the group approached the walls of Fastu with Frank and Vera riding at the head of the column of undead. As they neared the town, the archers on the wall took notice,

nocking arrows and eyeing the group nervously. When they were only a couple dozen yards from the wall, Vera gestured at him.

And I get to do the talking... Great.

“Hello!” Frank shouted. “My name is Frank, left hand of the Regent of the Twilight Throne. I need to speak with the leader of your town.”

The group on the wall shuffled slightly, glancing at each other and then back at some point hidden within the town. Slowly, an older gentleman stepped up onto the rampart, eyeing Frank and the collection of undead behind him warily. It was strange for Frank to encounter humans after spending most of his time in the Twilight Throne – where decaying flesh and exposed bone was the norm.

“My name is Corvin. I am the head elder of Fastu,” the old man said, his voice rasping and carrying faintly on the wind. He was dressed in a plain brown robe, and a thick cane kept him propped upright. “What business do you have here?”

Frank abruptly decided that he should dissemble. Telling these villagers that he was here to take their village – voluntarily or by force – seemed... well, stupid. That might be a conversation that he should have with Corvin privately.

“We are visiting the towns around the Twilight Throne at our Regent’s order.” He glanced at Vera as he tried to think of a more benign excuse for why they were there. She patted her skeletal wolf mount and looked at him suggestively. “We have... ah... heard reports that the undead in this area have grown in strength and are threatening some of the towns.”

Shit. I hope that works, Frank thought to himself – mentally and physically crossing his fingers.

The townsfolk on the walls began murmuring to themselves, their expression worried. “This is indeed a problem,” Corvin replied evenly, eyeing their group more appraisingly, as though counting the number of soldiers. “Although, you don’t seem to have brought very many troops.”

“I assure you, the Kin are exceptionally well-trained,” Frank replied, patting himself on the back for his quick response. “We can also call for reinforcements if necessary. This is just a preliminary expedition to determine the extent of the threat.”

Corvin continued to stare at the group and then suddenly came to some sort of decision. “So be it,” he said gruffly, gesturing at the townspeople. “Let them in.”

“Good job,” Vera murmured to Frank as the gates slowly swung open.

Frank felt a small glow of pride. He had done pretty well there! “If we can get inside before we strike, this will be much easier,”

the gruff undead woman added. "If we wait until they're asleep, we shouldn't face much opposition at all."

His good humor immediately evaporated at that comment. Now he might have to kill a bunch of unarmed townspeople. Great. Maybe there was some way to avoid a conflict before it came to that. He could still hope.

The column of undead entered the town, the Kin staying on edge and their hands remaining near their weapons. It seemed that Vera had instructed them to anticipate betrayal. The severe woman always seemed to be thinking one step ahead. He also noted the way her eyes skimmed the open courtyard directly inside the gate, tracking the movements of the guards on the walls and taking a rough headcount of the village's population.

Her caution proved unnecessary, however. The townspeople eyed the undead curiously, but they seem more relieved than scared. A large crowd had gathered as the remaining villagers caught wind that a group of Twilight Throne soldiers had arrived. Frank surveyed the crowd and the militia on the walls, noting that they weren't much better off than the people of Peccavi. They looked gaunt and weary, and several townsfolk seemed to be sporting freshly bandaged injuries.

Perhaps there had been more truth to Frank's bullshit than he had anticipated.

Corvin stepped forward to greet Frank as he dismounted, offering a wrinkled hand. "I apologize for our caution. These are hard times."

"I can see that," Frank replied, accepting his grip. "What exactly is the problem?"

The older man grimaced. "Before the change, we were a small hunting village, dependent on the nearby herds. We never did well, but we survived."

Frank sighed. "I suspect the transformation changed that? The way it has converted the local wildlife into undead beasts has placed a burden on many villages."

"Indeed," Corvin replied, his tone not accusing despite these changes being Jason's fault. "However, we have fared better than most. If anything, I would say that the changes improved things for us." This earned him a surprised glance from Frank, and the old man chuckled. "We were already hunters, but now we have more interesting prey. Our men were able to hunt and capture some of the local undead – which allowed us to trade with neighboring towns for food and supplies. The novelty of these creatures brings large prices abroad."

Frank was a little shocked. The villagers had adapted to the changes better than he expected. Yet, he still saw the way the

townsfolk now whispered worriedly among themselves and eyed their group hopefully. "I suspect you are about to tell me that something terrible happened," Frank said.

"Not all at once," Corvin replied, shaking his head as his gaze dropped to the ground. "The native undead have grown stronger over time, but our own hunters were able to keep pace."

His frown deepened, his eyes clouding over as he recalled some event that Frank couldn't see. "Until a few weeks ago, that is. The native creatures have begun to grow more powerful at an alarming rate. New types of skeletons have also begun to spring up – in much larger numbers than what we had encountered before. We... we lost many hunters, and many more have been injured."

Corvin's eyes skimmed across the nearby townsfolk. "In the last few days, things have worsened even further. Some of the creatures have felt confident enough to attack the town directly. Now we are barely holding on. I am not certain what is happening, but it is clear that we won't survive here much longer."

Frank and Vera shared a look. Clearly, the issue they had encountered with the nest was not a one-off problem. Something – or someone – must be stirring up and empowering the regular creatures around the Twilight Throne. However, their identity and purpose continued to remain elusive.

"Well, we should be able to help fortify the town," Frank began, turning back to Corvin. "In fact, part of the reason..."

He was cut off by a scream from atop the nearby palisade. Every eye turned to the source of the noise, people gasping and crying out in horror as they took in the scene. A skeletal creature clung to one of the hunters, its face buried in his neck and dark blood soaking his clothes and the boards of the rampart as he sunk to his knees. The monster pulled away, letting the lifeless body fall to the ground as it surveyed the crowd.

The creature was the size of a large dog, but with six legs, each one terminating in a set of prehensile hands replete with razor-sharp claws. As it saw the crowd watching, it rose up on two legs, flexing its other extremities as it roared up into the sky, the flickering torches revealing the blood trickling down its jaws and staining its ivory ribcage crimson. In between its limbs were what appeared to be flaps of dark energy that swayed gently as the creature moved.

How did it get on the wall? Frank wondered. What about our scouts?

Before he could react, an arrow shot through the air, burrowing itself in the creature's face and tearing away a portion of its skull. Another missile ripped its head clean from its shoulders and the creature dropped to the ramparts, its body breaking apart as the dark

mana binding it together fled. Frank turned to see that Vera held a bow, the string still vibrating. Yet the general hadn't moved fast enough; the creature's roar was echoed from the forest, the dead trees outside Fastu coming alive with the cries of the undead.

More were coming.

"To me!" Vera shouted at the Kin, trying to form a defensive line. "Try to move the villagers into the center of the formation!"

She was too late.

A swarm of the creatures seemed to float in from the tree line outside of town. As Frank stared in shock, he saw that they had each spread their limbs wide, using the flaps of dark mana to glide through the air. The one Vera had slain must have managed to get onto the ramparts while the guards were distracted by the discussion at the gate.

Frank quickly inspected these new creatures.

Gliding Leech – Levels 160-170

Health – Unknown

Mana – Unknown

Equipment – Unknown

Resistances – Unknown

Holy shit, he thought to himself. These leeches were even stronger than the Wraithlings.

The wave of monsters hit the edge of the wall and began slaughtering the hunters that were too slow to abandon their posts. The leeches tore into their flesh with clawed hands, and screams of pain filled the air as blood bubbled from the open wounds. The shouts were soon cut off as the monsters clamped their jaws on exposed throats, appearing to drink the blood of their victims. As Frank watched, one of the feeding monsters began to glow with a soft red light – similar to his *Rage of the Herd* ability.

Do they get stronger as they drink blood?

His eyes skimmed the chaotic running forms around him, many of the villagers trying to flee back into the interior of the town. Nearby, Vera was forming a circle in the open space near the gate, the wolves fighting on the front lines as their archers and mages assumed defensive positions inside the formation.

The monsters pursued the fleeing townsfolk hungrily, skittering along the ground on their six legs with frightening speed – their skeletal ribcages hugging the ground and making them difficult to see. They leaped on unarmed men and women, ripping open their throats even as they tried to run away. Screams from further inside the village indicated that some of the leeches were already picking off the rest of

the civilians.

There was nothing he could do to help those people.

Frank could feel rage simmering in his veins as he witnessed the sight before him. Without thinking, he abruptly transformed his legs, his knees inverting with a sickening pop and thick fur sprouting from his skin. Flames curled up his axes, illuminating the area around him and painting him as a target for the leeches. Dozens of dark orbs turned in his direction – whether drawn by the light or the heat, he wasn't certain.

Either way, it served his purpose nicely.

Nearly a dozen leeches swarmed in his direction, skittering along the ground, and leaping from the ramparts. Frank didn't wait for them to arrive. He launched himself forward at a reckless pace, intercepting one leech in mid-air with his axe. With his momentum and magically reinforced weapon, his blade chopped the creature cleanly in half. Fresh blood exploded from the leech's stomach, the spray splashing against Frank. The sticky substance only served to enrage Frank further.

This was the blood of innocents.

He lost himself to the blood rage, his vision turning red as he began to act instinctively. He abandoned all sense of self-preservation – simply wading into the crowd of leeches and chopping madly with his axes. Around him was only bone and blood – claws and limbs. He roared his fury as he struck repeatedly in a whirlwind of blows, cleaving the undead apart.

More than one creature scored a hit against him, tearing into the skin of his arms and back with their claws. A leech managed to grab his leg, sinking its jaws into the flesh of his thigh. With a roar of pain, Frank abandoned his axes, his arms warping and thick bands of muscle pulsing under his skin as his hands transformed into thickly furred claws. He snatched at the creature, smashing its skull between his massive paws until only ivory dust remained.

Then he set to work with his bare hands, smashing, clawing, and grabbing at the leeches which seemed to swell and crest against him in a never-ending wave. His claws shredded and cracked bone and his enhanced blows were enough to pulverize limbs. He grabbed a nearby leech, using it to bat aside another three of the creatures before slamming it into the ground and smashing in its skull with his foot.

Frank wasn't sure how much time passed – there was only blood and bone and pain. And then he suddenly found himself standing still, his chest heaving and his pulse pounding in his ears. His skin was covered in blood, and large cuts dotted his body. The adrenaline pumping through his veins numbed him to the pain, the

dull, throbbing ache only serving to fuel his rage.

He looked around himself menacingly, eyeing the remaining leeches who now gave him a wide berth – skittering around him sideways but not willing to engage again. Frank leaned forward, flexing his arms, and screaming his rage at the creatures, taunting them to fight.

They never got a chance.

A stream of dark magic and arrows filled the air around Frank, each bolt slamming home and destroying a leech. The creatures fell around him, their bones rattling to the ground and the dark mana fading from their bodies. Quiet reigned once more, with only the occasional groan of the injured breaking the silence. In some ways, that calm was more oppressive than the sounds of battle.

Frank whirled and found the Kin standing behind him, their bows and staves pointed in his direction. For a moment, he saw them as just more undead, to be destroyed and crushed between his palms and he took a ponderous step forward. Then he realized he was looking at his teammates – his Kin. It was difficult, but he willed himself to calm down – trying to let go of the anger that had overtaken him. Gradually, his vision began to clear, and his arms and legs regained their natural appearance.

And he finally saw what remained of Fastu.

All around him were the bodies of the fallen, mixed with the broken ivory bones of the leeches. The vacant gazes of more than one villager seemed to fix on him, their blood staining the ground an unholy crimson and mixing with the dusty gray dirt to form a bloody slurry. His gaze focused on one form. Corvin lay among the dead, his throat torn out and his expression full of terror – a testament to his last moments.

Through his shock and his clouded thoughts, Frank suddenly realized he didn't see any survivors – only the bodies of the fallen. He could hear footsteps behind him and he turned, meeting Vera's bleached-white gaze. Traces of blood stained her armor, and her sleeve was ripped, evidence that she had participated in the battle as well. Her expression was hard as she met Frank's eyes.

"How many?" he grunted.

"Among the Kin, we count nine dead," she answered bluntly. "We can assume they killed our scouts since no warning was raised. However, our troops responded quickly to the ambush and your... distraction made our work easier."

She hesitated before continuing, as though unsure how to frame her next report. "The villagers are another matter. We weren't able to protect them, and it appears that another group of leeches entered over the southern wall – cutting off any who tried to flee. We haven't

searched the town, but it is likely that nearly everyone is dead and only a handful are still alive.”

Frank closed his eyes, a heavy weight settling in his stomach. Amid his anger, he felt a strange emotion bubbling to the surface. Relief. *At least I won't have to kill them myself.* The stray thought came to him unbidden, and the feeling in his stomach clenched in response – Frank finally recognizing it as guilt. Guilt that he hadn't been able to save these people, and that their deaths still furthered his purpose.

Why did this game have to feel so damn real?

“Okay,” Frank said finally, opening his eyes and meeting Vera's gaze. “Have the Kin gather the dead and the remains of these creatures near the gate.”

With that final order, Frank strode off, heading into the interior of the town. He would assess the damage himself. As the undead soldiers saw him approaching, they backed off quickly and gave him a wide berth – no one challenging the blood-covered barbarian. They had seen him lose control, and their expressions reflected a mixture of astonishment and fear.

“And what will you be doing?” Vera called after him.

“It's time I spoke with Jason,” he answered calmly, not bothering to turn around.

Chapter 19 - Victorious

It took Jason a few seconds to come to terms with the fact that he was still alive, kneeling between two ivory mounds of bone. The onrushing hordes of Night Children had broken apart, their limbs littering the floor around him. Near the entrance to the alcove, the bones stacked up nearly three feet, evidence of just how many of the small creatures had smashed against Jason and Riley during the event.

With a grunt, Jason hauled himself to his feet, weaving unsteadily for a moment. His stamina and mana still hadn't recovered from the battle, and he was on his last legs – both mentally and physically. Now that he wasn't being attacked, he could feel a dull pain radiating from his shoulder, the arrow still embedded in his skin. Taking a deep breath, he ripped it out, taking a chunk of skin with it and black blood spraying his armor. The world listed sideways.

Once everything stopped spinning, and he regained his balance, Jason gingerly picked his way through the bones, his boots crunching as he walked. The Venom Spitters had dropped from their perch along the crystalline columns, the occasional fanged maw still staring at him from the floor. He had no idea how many of the creatures they had fought, but the debris made it seem like they had faced an army.

I can't believe we survived, Jason thought. *Or at least one of us did...*

As he arrived back at the center of the challenge room, a flash of multi-colored light ripped open the air beside him, signaling Riley's return. Jason jumped back instinctively – still a bit on edge after the protracted battle. Riley appeared abruptly, her eyes skimming across the room as she tried to get her bearings, eventually settling on Jason, and taking in his haggard appearance. His armor was torn and broken, and only fragments of bone lingered on his skin, the last traces of his *Bone Armor*. Black blood was still dripping from his shoulder.

"So, we lost?" she asked, her expression grim.

"Technically, you beat the room," Rex answered her question, his wispy form materializing beside the pillar in the center of the room. He waved a hand, and the strange voice sounded through the room again.

Challenge 1: A Trial of Bone completed.

Total Time: 10 minutes.

Riley Kills: 158

Jason Kills: 93

Both Jason's and Riley's eyes widened in surprise at this announcement. "That was only ten minutes?" Jason murmured. He was also surprised at the raw number of kills. It felt like he had barely grazed most of the creatures as he tried to keep them at bay.

Rex grunted, eyeing the two of them critically and inventorying Jason's injuries. "Yep, that was only ten minutes. Felt like an eternity, didn't it? When your stamina and health run out and you're running on fumes, the mind can play tricks on you. Every movement, every swing feels like you are moving through molasses."

"But we won!" Riley said, a small smile creeping across her face.

"Yes, yes you did," Rex agreed, his jaw clacking slightly as he nodded. "Barely. By the skin of your teeth and only after one of you died, though." He glanced at Riley. "You missed the final moments of the challenge, but our boy here was one blow away from death."

He glanced back and forth between them, his expression severe. "By all rights, you should have failed here. You both barely made it to the ten-minute mark and you eked out a victory only by manipulating the terrain of the room," he added, looking pointedly at Jason.

"Normal tactics like positioning shouldn't be against the rules," Jason retorted defensively.

"And they're not," Rex agreed with a curt nod. "But it does defeat the point of this exercise – as I already explained. The voices have told me how other Keepers have fared in this challenge. They were able to beat the room by standing in the center, being attacked from all sides. Some were capable of holding this room by themselves after they were fully trained..." The skeletal man trailed off, watching Jason's reaction.

Jason simply stared at his former general in shock as he tried to digest this information. He had no idea how that was possible. Examining his own performance in his mind's eye, he wasn't even certain how he could have improved on the last challenge. Had the Keepers been that much higher in levels? Or were they simply better than him?

"As I told you at the beginning," Rex continued as he saw that his point had sunk home, "clever tricks will not be enough in the outside world. The point of these challenges is to train you in these combat skills and allow you to master them. You only harm yourself

by trying to circumvent this training.”

Jason was now staring despondently at the floor, his expression grim. They had won, but only barely – and only by manipulating the challenge. What would the next room entail? Would they be able to get away with the same sort of strategies forever? Rex’s words carried a somber truth.

In contrast, Riley didn’t seem bothered by Rex’s reaction at all. Not that Jason could blame her. Even with his strategy, she had still taken out almost double the number of enemies. He suspected that she could have possibly handled the challenge solo by kiting the skeletons around the room.

The former general’s expression softened. “With that out of the way, you two did technically pass the challenge – and much faster than the other participants. Oh, and you were also down a soul guard. So, the voices have decided that this was sufficient.” He chuckled lightly. “I just don’t want your success going to your heads!”

Jason glanced up at him, a tentative smile tugging at his lips. “So, what happens now?”

Rex’s grin widened, giving him an almost evil appearance. “First let’s address your training. You can return to this first room as often as you like now that you have conquered the challenge. In fact, we’ll be adding this first challenge to your regular training regimen from now on, and I expect both of you to attempt it at least once per day. There won’t be a victory condition – you fight until you die.”

Jason’s smile instantly vanished. They had barely beaten this challenge once, and Rex expected them to repeat it daily from now on? If he had any doubts before, he was now firmly sure that his former general was a sadist.

“That...” Riley struggled to marshal a response, her expression mirroring Jason’s.

“As I said at the beginning, you two don’t have much time,” Rex replied to their unspoken complaint. “Necessity is the mother of invention and all that. Now about the next room, since I bet you two are just itching to get started...” The skeletal man waved a dark hand at the far wall.

A pile of bone near the wall began to tremble and shake. Riley and Jason immediately reached for their weapons, but, this time, no monsters formed. Instead, the piles exploded – the ivory materials whipping through the air. Bones continued to collect until the maelstrom was a solid white, obscuring the wall from sight. Then, as suddenly as it had begun, the bones simply collapsed to the floor, the rattle and scrape of bone striking stone causing a shiver to run up Jason’s back.

On the far wall now stood a massive door composed entirely of

bone, the substance intertwining in overlapping waves to form a thick frame and arch. Jason could see skulls mixed in among the bones, vacant eye sockets staring at them as though challenging him and Riley to enter – or perhaps warning them away. The door itself was comprised of a solid, melded white slab of bone with jointed skeletal arms serving as handles.

“Well, that isn’t terrifying at all,” Riley grumbled.

Jason couldn’t help but agree. The door looked formidable, which only raised questions regarding what they would find on the other side. However, despite their last grueling encounter and Rex’s foreboding comments, he was still curious to discover what new ability he would learn in this next room.

“I guess we should get started?” Jason offered, sparing a glance at Riley.

Riley frowned, glancing at something that he couldn’t see – presumably some sort of notice on her system UI. “Actually, I need to go,” she replied, not quite looking at Jason as her hand swiped at the air. “I need to meet a friend.”

Jason could feel his stomach lurch again. With the adrenaline of the last battle still coursing through his veins, he had forgotten all about Caleb. Of course, he would be more important to her than helping Jason finish these challenges. He could feel a glimmer of irritation simmering in his veins.

“It’s fine,” he said curtly. “Go ahead. I’ll go investigate by myself.”

Riley glanced at him in surprise. Picking up on his harsh tone, she frowned. “Okay. I guess I’ll be back tomorrow after class.”

Jason just grunted in acknowledgment. “Have fun with your *friend*,” he added just before Riley disappeared in a flash of light. He stared at the spot she had just vacated for a long moment, his thoughts warring between anger and depression.

A clacking sound knocked Jason out of his morose thoughts. He turned to find Rex staring at him. “I’m trying to click my tongue,” the general explained, gesturing at his jaw. “But without any flesh, it’s a little difficult. Of course, I guess I don’t really have a jaw either.” He swiped his hand through his face, the mist breaking apart before reforming a few seconds later. “And that just makes me wonder where my voice is coming from...”

The undead man shook his head, the vapor rippling and blurring. “That’s a rabbit hole right there! Anyway, back on subject, you haven’t done anything to mend things with the girl, have you?”

“It’s complicated,” Jason replied slowly.

“Well, then *uncomplicate* it. I wasn’t sugar coating things for you a second ago. You two *barely* made it through that challenge, and

the next one isn't easier. And we haven't even discussed the third challenge yet..." He trailed off again, his head tilted as though listening to something. A worried expression lingered on his face for a fraction of a second before he turned his attention back to Jason.

Jason grimaced at the thought of talking to Riley. What would he even say? "Hey, so you picked another guy over me. That makes me really upset. I thought we were about to kiss – you know, right after I revealed that I had explored one of your worst memories without your permission. Oh, and forgetting for a second that I only saw that memory after slitting your wrists as part of an unholy sacrifice. So now you're bound to me whether you like it or not. #soulmates."

He mentally recoiled at the thought. It was no wonder she had chosen someone more normal, whose life wasn't in shambles and wasn't being painted as a psychopath as part of a very public regulatory hearing. *Yeah, I'm a fucking catch*, he thought bitterly.

Rex sighed as he watched Jason's inner turmoil play out across his face and the way he stood with his arms crossed defensively. "I can tell you aren't going to listen to me. That's fine. I'm just dead – because of you, I might mention. I also have access to the memories of thousands of years of the Kin. So, I definitely don't know what I'm talking about," he added sarcastically.

"I...", Jason began, fumbling to figure out how to respond.

He was saved from answering as his UI dinged, indicating that he was receiving an incoming message. "Uh, I have a message. One second."

Rex just stared at him. If the skeletal man still had eyebrows, they would have been raised skeptically. With a swipe of his wrist, Jason pulled up his chat window.

Frank: Hey. You and I need to talk if you have a moment. We just arrived in the first town, Fastu, and we've encountered a few... problems.

Jason: Sure. Just give me a moment, and I'll call you over the game's voice chat.

Jason turned back to Rex, who was still watching him expectantly. "Frank ran into a problem, and I need to talk to him."

Rex snorted. "Of course. Just remember what I said. You can

only bury your head in the sand for so long before someone comes along and guts you and steals your stuff.” With that, the former general disappeared, the mists making up his body breaking apart and swirling through the air before streaming back into the globe in the center of the room.

Despite Rex’s brutal rendition of that saying, there was some truth to his words. It was just that, in this particular case, the truth didn’t help. Jason still didn’t know how to fix things with Riley – or whether he *could* fix things. So, for now, he would deal with whatever problem Frank had run into. At least that would give him something else to focus on. Besides, he wasn’t sure this counted as burying his head in the sand. He still had to deal with the other issues plaguing his kingdom, after all! Although a nagging voice in the back of his mind informed him that he was just trying to rationalize ignoring the issues between him and Riley.

He was really starting to hate that voice.

Jason hurried back into the mana well room before pulling up his system UI and initiating a call with Frank. He heard a tone chime several times before Frank’s voice came through. “Hey, man,” Frank greeted him, his voice sounding more subdued than normal.

“Hey, Frank,” Jason replied tentatively. “So, what’s this problem?”

He heard a sigh on the other end of the line. “I’m not even sure where to start.”

A few minutes later, Frank had relayed most of the essential bits of information – from their encounter with the Wraithlings on the road to Fastu, to the destruction of the town at the hands of the Leeches. The barbarian also filled him in on his suspicions that someone was manipulating the ecosystem around the Twilight Throne. Jason wasn’t exactly comforted by the idea that someone was messing with the native undead.

“Well, shit,” Jason finally replied as Frank finished his story.

“That basically sums up my reaction too,” his friend replied dryly.

“I’m not sure what we can do about someone messing with the nests – if that’s even the case,” Jason added. “For all we know, those crystals could have formed naturally. We could have either Cecil or Morgan check it out and see if they can learn anything else, but I’m not counting on anything. It’s not like any of us have a lot of experience with terraforming an area with dark magic.”

Frank let out a snort of amusement. “I guess that’s true. Although, these attacks do seem odd. If things were operating normally, it feels like the native undead would have settled into some sort of balance. They’re all predators, but it doesn’t make sense how

fast some are evolving or how their numbers have increased so dramatically.”

“Unless this is just part of the process,” Jason replied, rubbing at his eyes in frustration. “But you raise a fair point. We can’t rule out the possibility that something or someone is behind this. Although, I’m not sure what we can do about it at the moment.”

“And here I was hoping you’d have some clever strategy,” Frank said, amusement tingeing his voice. “No crazy-ass plan that puts me in imminent danger? I’m disappointed.”

“You have to give me a second. I don’t just hand out amazing strategies on command,” Jason replied, smiling slightly. With everything going on, he hadn’t realized how much he missed his friend – including his teasing.

“Kidding aside, right now, I think we need to focus on the immediate problem,” Jason continued. “Is everyone in Fastu dead?”

Frank grunted. “Basically. There are a handful of survivors, and even those people are injured. I had the Kin pile the remains of the townsfolk and the Leeches near the gate. I know your brilliant strategy thing is still on cooldown, but if you had some way to raise these people remotely, that would be awesome. I don’t know how we’re going to get the corpses back to the Twilight Throne otherwise – we left behind a full division to clean up that first nest of Wraithlings.”

Jason grimaced. He had been busy lately and had entirely forgotten about his promise to Frank to investigate ways to use his *Undead Devotion* remotely. His gaze shifted to the mana well beside him; the dark energy collecting in the basin seemed to suck in the light from the nearby torches. Well, there was no time like the present.

“Give me a second,” Jason said.

Without waiting for his friend to respond, Jason plunged his hand into the mana well. The energy trickled around his fingers, causing his skin to tingle. The well’s interface came online, floating above the basin. He noticed several icons in the menu that hadn’t been there before – each one looked like a floating exclamation point. Perhaps they indicated new features.

He tapped the menu item related to the well’s status and a series of screens popped up.

Mana Well Console: Status

Description: The well holds liquid dark mana that can be used to aid the city and its residents. The available mana is limited, however. Actions taken by citizens of the Twilight Throne that are consistent

with their desires, and kills made by citizens of the city, increase the power held by the well. Other options to increase the well's spirit charges may become available over time. The mana well can also be upgraded and expanded to increase its storage capacity and the efficiency with which it collects spirit charges.

Well Level: 2 (23% to level 3)

Current Spirit Charges: 56/110

Spirit Charge Income: + 3 every 2 days (average).

Jason's brow furrowed in confusion as he reviewed the prompt. It appeared that the well had somehow leveled up and he had gained a large number of Spirit Charges. The only problem was that he had no idea how that had happened. He re-read the description once again. Maybe this had been the result of the battles between Frank and the native undead? Or possibly the deaths of the villagers in Fastu? Or maybe all of the above?

In any event, the well had clearly leveled up and Jason now had a decent stockpile of Spirit Charges. Now, he just needed to figure out what he could do with them.

He tapped at the screen and navigated back to the main menu. He saw exclamation points hovering beside both "Miracles" and "Build Options." He was curious about what buildings he could now construct and tapped at the icon. An inspection of the updated build list indicated that the Dark Spire now had new options. He brought up the description for that structure.

Mana Well Console: Build Options

Structure: Dark Spire

Description: This building can be formed anywhere inside the Twilight Throne's radius of influence. The tower acts as an extension of the dark keep, expanding the territory's perpetual darkness in a greater radius. Further upgrades provide additional benefits.

Cost: 5 Spirit Charges

New Upgrades Available:

1. Vision Enhancement (+ 10 Spirit Charges)

1. Remote Casting (+ 5 Spirit Charges)

There we go! Jason thought to himself. Finally, something was working in his favor!

“Hey, Frank,” he said aloud. “You still there?”

“Sure. You sound excited. Did you find something that can help?”

“Possibly,” Jason replied. “Just hold on a second. I’m going to try something.”

Jason turned back to the console, an excited grin appearing on his face. He tapped the two upgrade features and then saw an option hovering below the notification, the word “Build” framed in glowing blue. Without hesitating, he pressed the button, and the entire menu disappeared. In its place, a topographical map appeared above the well, showing the Twilight Throne and the area around the city. The display flickered with translucent sapphire energy – similar to the city management interface.

Not wanting to waste time, he quickly searched the map. The Twilight Throne was centered in the middle of the zone, the city shown as a glowing green icon that stood out in stark contrast to the rest of the map. Shifting his attention, Jason’s eyes traveled directly west. A few seconds later, he discovered what appeared to be a small village, located just within the city’s area of influence. Strangely, he noticed that the town was a solid gray.

Maybe this means it hasn’t been claimed yet? He wondered if he needed to manually claim every village or if this would happen automatically once all the villagers were slain – like Peccavi. He supposed they would likely find out as Frank continued his mission.

It only took him a moment to confirm that the remainder of the towns inside the Twilight Throne’s area of influence were similarly gray – with the sole exception of Peccavi, which was illuminated in the same green glow as the Twilight Throne. At least now he could easily check on Frank’s progress without needing regular updates from his friend.

Not sure what to do at this stage, Jason simply tapped Fastu on the map. As soon as he did, another notification appeared in the air in front of him.

Mana Well Console: Build Confirmation

You are about to build a [Dark Spire] in the town of Fastu. The total Spirit Charge cost is [20].

Please confirm that you wish to build the structure. [Yes/No]

Jason only glanced at the notification before hitting “yes.”

The map abruptly vanished, and he was left standing with his hand submerged in the dark mana, blue torchlight flickering through the room. Yet, nothing seemed to happen.

Just as he was starting to wonder if he had done something wrong, the opaque black substance between his fingers shifted slightly. As he watched, the mana appeared to come alive, tendrils stretching out of the well even as the rest of the energy clung to his skin and began crawling up his arm. The tentacles of mana lashed at his skin, grabbing hold of him even as he tried to pull away and swiftly covering his body.

Jason felt his skin grow cold where the mana touched him. It kept growing – faster and faster. It stretched up his arms and covered his torso, creeping up his neck and closer to his face. As the dark liquid spread, it felt like ice was being injected directly into his veins, clouding his thoughts and making it difficult to think. A part of his mind reveled in the sensation, in the relief from his constant tormented thoughts. It clung to that sense of power, abandoning restraint.

Two tentacles suddenly lanced out from the basin, stretching into the air until they hovered in front of Jason’s face. The tendrils sharpened into fine points, inching toward his pupils. He could feel his heart hammering in his chest, fear briefly clouding his mind despite the chill energy that flooded his veins.

Then the tendrils shot forward, and the world went dark.

Chapter 20 - Unholy

The call with Jason ended without any warning, a single chime indicating that he had lost the connection. He stepped out of a nearby house and swiped at his system UI. He had been walking through Fastu while talking to Jason, carefully inspecting each house for survivors – although that task had proven fruitless. Frank's brow now furrowed in confusion as he looked at the screens that hovered in the air before him. Jason was still in his group and still logged in.

Had his friend hung up on him?

He didn't have long to consider this question as a violent tremor suddenly shook the small town. Frank listed to the side, his palm slamming into the boards of a nearby building and barely allowing him to stay standing.

As Frank regained his balance, he saw a large crack rip open the earth at his feet, the split running through the town in the direction of the gate. The nearby buildings groaned under the strain, and their wooden boards cracked and splintered as the ground shifted.

He heard cries from the front of the town and decided he should get his ass moving instead of standing around and staring. He wasn't certain what was going on, but he needed to protect the Kin. For all he knew, this was another undead creature come to finish off Fastu for good. His legs transformed into their wolf-like appearance and he began sprinting through the buildings, following the cracks in the ground that were all leading back toward the gate.

As he reached the courtyard where they had fended off the leeches, Frank came to an abrupt stop, his feet kicking up gray dust. The splinters in the earth all funneled to a single point beside the gate, where a massive obsidian spire was slowly emerging from the ground. Its surface seemed to be made of jagged crystal, all sharp edges and harsh angles as it stretched into the sky – growing larger and larger as Frank watched.

A plethora of corpses and bone had been piled beside the spire. Blood had pooled below the bodies and now spread across the ground, spilling into the cracks in a macabre waterfall. A deafening peal of thunder rocked the sky. Frank looked up and saw that the black clouds had begun to circle and spin around the spire, thickening quickly while flashes of bright lightning arced through the air.

"What is this?" Vera shouted, suddenly standing beside him with her hand on the hilt of her sword.

"I don't know," he shouted back. He was really hoping that this

was Jason's doing. Otherwise, they were probably in for one hell of a fight.

The spire continued its ascent until it stood nearly forty feet in the air. Lightning struck the column, smashing against its surface again and again. The blast of heat and light pushed back the undead that filled the courtyard, many covering their faces and running for cover. As each bolt struck the pillar, it seemed to glow with unholy energy until bands of dark mana circled the structure in a chaotic pattern, and arcane symbols flashed in and out of existence.

The energy funneled up the spire, accumulating into a dense globe at the apex – the miasma seeming to suck in the light and darken the entire area. Once the orb was nearly three feet across, the lightning and dark energy began to fade. The globe slowly broke apart, drifting into wisps of black, misty energy that collected and reformed erratically. A shape began to emerge from the energy, a ghastly visage – its features composed entirely of obsidian mist – with horns jutting from its forehead.

Frank simply stared, vaguely recognizing the face before him. “Jason...?” he murmured.

Turning, the creature faced the undead in the courtyard, its featureless black eyes seeming to look through them. “Hello, Kin,” the face spoke. “You have much to be proud of today. You have conquered Fastu in the name of the Twilight Throne. With this victory, we have expanded the reach of our kingdom.” A rumbling peal of thunder punctuated this statement.

Jason's gaze shifted to the bodies piled beside the pillar. “Do not mourn for the dead. Some of our own people and these villagers perished today, but death is only the beginning. The darkness gives us new life!”

A staccato series of lightning bolts suddenly struck the pile, the energy framing the bodies of the fallen villagers. For some, their limbs reattached, their decaying bodies gaining their former resilience and their skin turning a sickly gray-green. For others, their skin drained away, revealing bleached bone. The newly minted undead soon opened soulless white eyes and dark orbs of energy – their gaze searching and uncertain. Then they wrenched themselves to their feet, stumbling and crawling from the pile of dead as though compelled by some outside force.

The soldiers in the courtyard moved to help them, urging their new brethren farther away from the dark spire that now loomed over Fastu. Once most of the undead had fled, all that was left were the remains of the leeches, their skeletal bodies creating a heaping mound of bones beside the spire. Jason stared at the buildings next, his dark visage pulsing with unholy energy as arcane words spilled from his

lips in a guttural language that Frank couldn't identify.

"The darkness is our home!" Jason's voice intoned, his inflection harsh and reverberating through the small town.

Another immense globe of dark energy began to form in front of the pillar, the tendrils streaming in from every direction and colliding in a roiling ball of dark mana. The miasma grew swiftly, growing ever larger. Frank heard the gasps of the Kin around them, many backpedaling quickly away from the enormous globe.

Before Frank could question what Jason was about to do, the orb exploded. A wave of energy swept through the Kin and over the town. Frank flinched back involuntarily as the wave struck him – leaving no time for him to run. Yet it didn't harm him. Instead, the energy swept through and around him and the other soldiers, racing through the streets and overtop the nearby buildings.

As the Kin looked on, Jason transformed the humble town. The splitting boards that made up each house solidified into a dark obsidian crystal and melded together, the shiny substance reflecting the lightning that still arced erratically among the boiling black cloud cover. The streets smoothed out and the cracks disappeared as quickly as they had formed, leaving polished cobblestone in their wake.

Then the energy struck the walls encircling the town. The wooden stakes of the palisade blended together, rippling and warping, growing and expanding. The new crystalline walls stretched even further into the sky, reaching nearly twenty feet before stopping. Ramps formed along the walls, granting easy access even as the crystal thickened to accommodate guard patrols.

"And finally, the darkness guards and protects!" Jason said as the transformation completed, drawing the crowd's attention back to the dark spire.

His gaze shifted to the bones of the leeches that had been piled beside the pillar. The bones drifted up into the air as though held by a monstrous, invisible hand. Dark energy cascaded through the ivory substance, drenching the bones in the malevolent mana. Then they began to condense, knitting themselves to form hulking skeletons, horns framing their heads and each one holding a spiked tower shield formed entirely of bone.

Within only moments, nearly two dozen Death Knights stood in the courtyard facing the Kin. As one, they turned to the dark spire, their dark, soulless eyes taking in Jason's visage. They raised their weapons in salute, their spine-like tails lashing and snapping at the air behind them.

Jason's gaze swept across the Kin and the newly resurrected villagers. "These are the blessings of the Twilight Throne. These are the boons given to the Kin. Immortality, a home, and the power to

protect what is ours!”

Without warning, one of the soldiers raised her weapon to the sky. Lightning illuminated her face, showing only avid devotion in her bleached-white eyes. “All hail the Twilight Throne!” she screamed harshly. Her cry was picked up by others, their voices filling the air and drowning out the thunder that still pealed in the skies. Strangely, tendrils of dark mana began to peel away from the Kin, filling the air with both their cries and the malignant energy.

The chant continued until the mana seemed to hover around the group like a dense fog. “Fastu is only the beginning,” Jason said. “With your help, we will spread the darkness until our reach extends to the far corners of our domain.”

The demon’s face turned to Frank, his featureless black eyes meeting Frank’s even as an evil grin split his misty lips. “Go, Frank. Lead them. Show the other towns what they gain by joining the Kin. If they refuse, then force them to accept the darkness into their hearts.”

Frank’s eyes widened in surprise, yet he felt himself caught up in the surge of energy that had spread through the courtyard. The dark mana seemed to whisper to him, urging him to accept his desires. To give in. With this power, he could be stronger. No longer the runt of his family. No longer struggling with the choices he needed to make. The darkness offered him freedom and the strength to pursue his desires. The sensation was tantalizing.

It was difficult for Frank to keep his thoughts clear as he stared at Jason’s face. Some small part of him wondered at his friend’s behavior. Was this really still Jason? This thing that could terraform parts of the game world? Who stared down at him like a dark god? He tried to tell himself that Jason was just doing his thing – getting into character. Still, it left him feeling unsettled. It felt like the line between the Regent of the Twilight Throne and his nerdy friend was breaking down, and he couldn’t decide if that was a good thing or not.

Chapter 21 - Floating

Alexion stood at the prow of the ship, his hands resting on the wooden railing, feeling the rough texture beneath his callused palms. Behind him, a foreman shouted orders at the yellow and red-robed mages bustling across the deck. A pair of mages always worked near the center of the vessel, channeling heated air into the balloons that rose above the ship to keep them afloat. Meanwhile, Alexion's Nephilim either flapped lazily in the air beside the craft or stood on the ship's deck, their weapons held at the ready.

Alexion turned his attention to the ground below. Several thousand feet in the air, he had an uninterrupted view of the game world for miles around. Rolling hills spanned toward the western horizon in the direction that the Crystal Reach was located. The occasional cloud blotted out the sun, creating misshapen and irregular shadows across the green landscape. This happy scene immediately stopped when Alexion turned his attention to the east. A dark cloud formation loomed several miles ahead of them, frequent flashes of lightning arcing among the billowing dark vapor and obscuring the land beyond.

Those lightning strikes were dangerous. They didn't pose much risk to infantry on the ground, but they did present a problem for their airship. While safer, going overtop the cloud cover meant that they couldn't see the ground below, forcing them to navigate by feel or tentative maps of the region – which were far from accurate. Landing wasn't a great solution either. It put them at risk of discovery and progress on foot within the influence of the Twilight Throne was difficult. Without *Night Vision* or a map, it was easy to get lost amid the barren branches of the forest that ringed the dark city. Alexion had experienced those issues firsthand, although he had never ventured far into Jason's territory.

That might need to change if they were to accomplish Evelyn's goal.

It was clear that the savvy woman wanted undead slaves. Such merchandise currently fetched an extraordinary price among the other NPC cities. Their enhanced endurance and the fact that they didn't need to eat or sleep made them invaluable slaves. In some places, they were apparently seen as a novelty – an expensive toy for a city's ruler.

With few other options, Alexion had grudgingly agreed to help Evelyn procure slaves. In return, she had agreed to sign an ongoing trade agreement between her guild and his city. With their combined

efforts, they were easily able to outfit the airship and assemble a crew. Within only a few days in-game, they were stationed on the western edge of the Twilight Throne's zone of influence. What he hadn't anticipated was that Evelyn would insist on accompanying him, claiming that she needed to protect her investment and her ship.

As though his thoughts had summoned her, the enigmatic woman suddenly stepped up beside Alexion, following his gaze to the dark clouds. Forgoing any armor, she wore a leather jacket over a corset – her clothing acting more to accentuate her curves than to offer any real protection. “The scouts have reported back,” she said casually. “I’ll admit that it was a good idea to bring a few dark mages with us.”

Alexion simply nodded. It had been difficult to find travelers who had chosen that magic school since many people opted not to start in the Twilight Throne and finding trainers could be difficult without a visit to the undead city. However, the few dark mages among the players typically had the *Night Vision* skill, which made them fantastic scouts.

“This isn’t my first time here,” Alexion replied. “What did the mages find?” he asked, glancing at her and noting the excitement dancing in her eyes. After days spent together in-game, he had become more adept at reading her expression.

“One of the towns along the border has come under the Twilight Throne’s influence,” Evelyn reported. “It seems that at least one division of Jason’s forces is making the rounds of the villages within his radius of influence – most likely picking them off one by one.”

Her smile widened. “Even more interesting, our spies in the city reported that a full two divisions left the Twilight Throne originally. It seems that they may have encountered some... *difficulty* with the native undead that roam the area.”

“You think the undead took out a full division?” Alexion asked in surprise. The creatures around the Twilight Throne had always been powerful, but he was shocked that they had grown in strength this quickly.

Evelyn shrugged. “We can’t say for certain, but I also can’t think of any other reason for this group’s numbers to have dwindled so dramatically. Either way, this has worked out even better than we expected. We have an opportunity here,” she continued, turning to face Alexion.

“How so?” he asked, as much to test her as to hear her thoughts on the matter. He already knew what he would do next – assuming he was acting on his own.

“Our scouts to the south indicate that those villages haven’t

been claimed yet and the area to the north is largely unoccupied,” Evelyn explained. Her eyes met his and her delicate mouth curved into a smirk. “Meaning that this is likely the first town that the Twilight Throne’s forces have conquered. If they start in the west and head counterclockwise around the dark city, we will have an opportunity to strike this new town without meeting much resistance.”

She arched an eyebrow, a smile gracing her lips. “Did my analysis meet with your *approval*?” Evelyn’s voice was taunting – calling him out for testing her.

Alexion matched her smile. He had reached a similar conclusion already, although he had cheated. One of their scouts had messaged him a few minutes ago with the same advice. Yet he couldn’t help but admire Evelyn. She might take any opportunity to pick at his pride and challenge him, but he couldn’t ignore the fact that she was extremely intelligent and resourceful. Even more strangely, the ever-present voice in the back of his mind had gone silent when she made barbed comments.

“Those were my thoughts as well,” Alexion finally replied. “I suppose we need only wait until the Twilight Throne’s forces leave and let them put some distance between us and them before we strike.”

Evelyn nodded. “I will inform the crew, and then I need to attend to some things in the real world. We will keep the airship stationed here and use the clouds to stay out of sight while we’re offline.” She looked at him sharply. “Your dark mages will keep their mouths shut, yes?”

“They have been well-paid, and they know not to cross me,” Alexion assured her.

“Good,” Evelyn replied with a curt nod.

Alexion opened his mouth to say something else but hesitated.

“Is there something else on your mind?” she asked, her gaze meeting his.

For some reason, Alexion felt his heart race as he looked into her eyes and he struggled to decide if he should follow through on his aborted question. He wasn’t certain whether this was a good idea or not. The voice in the back of his mind maintained its silence, not offering any guidance and neither his mother’s ghostly visage nor the Lady was present to weigh in on his actions. He would have to make his choice on his own.

“Actually, I’ve been meaning to ask you what you’re going to be doing this Saturday,” Alexion said, finally making a decision.

Evelyn tilted her head to the side, studying him. “Alex Lane, are you asking me out?”

“Think of it as a networking opportunity,” he amended, surprised at how nervous he felt at the mention of a date. Evelyn was hardly the first woman he had asked out. “My father’s company hosts a rather large party around this time of year before the holiday season is in full swing. It’s an opportunity to wine and dine distributors and tech vendors and showcase our new product lines. I expect this year’s gala will likely be even more over the top with the CPSC hearing looming in the background.”

“I have been following the proceeding with some interest,” Evelyn replied, although Alexion noted she had neither accepted nor declined his invitation. “It seems the CPSC is making Jason a significant part of their case.”

Alexion grimaced slightly at the mention of Jason. The hearing had been draining nearly every moment of his father’s time, and he hadn’t come home for days. The event had also been widely televised, his nemesis’ face emblazoned on most business and tech news channels. Alexion felt conflicted about the entire ordeal. He relished the idea of watching Jason get crucified on live television, but he was also interested in preserving his family’s business. After the last disaster at Jason’s home, he had decided to call a temporary cease-fire – at least in the real world.

“I’m confident my father will resolve this disruption. Gloria seems to have some sort of vendetta against our family and Jason personally,” he said with a dismissive wave of his hand. “But, back to the matter at hand, would you like to attend?”

“I’ll think about it,” Evelyn said, a familiar smirk lingering on her lips. With that statement, she swiped at the air and abruptly disappeared in a flash of multi-colored light.

Alexion stared at the spot where she had stood only a moment before, a frown plastered on his face. He didn’t know what it was about this woman. He had found himself intrigued by others, but more as casual amusements than anything serious. In each case he had held complete power, toying with them and twisting them to his will. This was why the fallout with Riley had been so grating. It was rare for one of his playthings to bite back.

“Ahh, look at that dumbstruck look on your face,” an eloquent voice spoke up beside him, causing Alexion to wince involuntarily.

He turned to find the Lady watching him with an amused expression on her face. She wore her typical white toga, the sunlight glinting off her golden hair. Alexion quickly glanced at the crew, concerned that they had noticed the goddess. Yet none of them looked up. He could only surmise that she was keeping her presence concealed from the others.

“What are you doing here?” he hissed quietly, turning so that

his back was to the crew.

“Simply checking in on my poor knight. He requires some babysitting. Imagine my surprise when I found him falling for another woman’s charms.”

Alexion could feel the voice stir in the back of his mind, angry whisperings clouding his thoughts. “I am not falling for her,” Alexion snapped. “We are business acquaintances, nothing more. This partnership will help stabilize the Crystal Reach and expand our economy.”

“I can see the advantages,” the Lady replied archly. “Which is why I have permitted you this *detour*.” She reached out and touched his chin with her fingers, tilting his head toward her. “But let me be clear. There is only one woman’s influence that matters. Without my support, you are nothing. Don’t let this tramp cloud your thoughts or distract you from your duty.”

Alexion stared into her eyes, her gaze hard and cold. For just a moment, he saw another face superimposed over the lady’s features – her skin more sallow and her eyes more haunted. The face seemed so familiar, creating an aching, hollow feeling in his chest, and conjuring the memories that the Old Man had forced upon him. Immediately, he tried to think of something else, not willing to let his mind probe at the edges of the open wound in his own mind.

He turned away, his attention focusing on the dark bank of clouds to the east. “I have not forgotten. As I said, it is a business relationship, nothing more,” he repeated. The Lady said nothing, but he heard a soft, incredulous snort.

“So why are you here?” Alexion asked. “Tormenting me seems to amuse you, but I suspect you have an ulterior motive.”

A smile graced the Lady’s lips. “Indeed, I have a clear understanding of my *priorities*,” she said meaningfully. “Suffice it to say that I am interested in something that the Twilight Throne has – or may come to have in the near future.”

“My guess is that we aren’t talking about slaves,” Alexion replied, eyeing the Lady curiously. What could interest the capricious goddess enough for her to show up and make an impromptu request?

“Ahh and there’s that sparkling wit again. It’s like catching a glimpse of a butterfly’s wings,” she replied in a dry tone. “Indeed, I am not interested in a few slaves. What I want is much more... interesting.”

The Lady paused for a moment, a rare flash of indecision sweeping across her face as she decided how to frame her next statement. “As you know, me and my siblings are bound by certain rules – rules that require me to be circumspect in what I reveal to you. So, I will choose my words cautiously and rely on you to pay careful

attention.” This earned him an appraising look, and Alexion bit down on his own mounting irritation. Enduring the lady’s arrogance was an acceptable price for some insight into her goals.

“My siblings and I are being punished for events that occurred long ago,” the Lady began carefully. “Now we have been given a single chance to redeem ourselves, except that only one of us will be given that opportunity. I suppose you could consider it something of a *friendly* rivalry. However, we are limited from acting directly – forced to rely on pawns such as yourself,” she bit out this last part as though it physically pained her to say the words.

Alexion stifled another retort. He might be a pawn, but it was clear that the Lady needed his assistance. That was interesting and perhaps something he could eventually use to his advantage.

“And what exactly do you need me to do?” Alexion asked.

The Lady’s eyes flashed with golden power. “After forming the elemental cities, the next step is to secure dominance of the lands surrounding the city – much as I have directed you to do,” she said this last part archly, reminding him that he hadn’t yet accomplished that task. “However, that is not where our little competition ends. The next step is much more involved and may require, let us say, a measure of direct engagement with the other avatars.”

“That is vague...” Alexion offered, trailing off.

The woman grimaced. “Not by choice. I walk a thin line here. You may discover in your travels a certain object that appears to be part of a larger whole.” She met his gaze evenly, her expression deady serious. “It is paramount that you secure this object by any means necessary. Nothing else matters. Nothing.”

“How will I know this *object* when I see it?” Alexion asked, now intrigued.

The Lady waved a dismissive hand. “Trust me, when the time comes, you will know. However, you must be prepared to act, and you must not let your newfound attachment with this *woman* distract you from your goal – or should I say *our* goal.” She leaned in close, her face hovering near his and her ruby-red lips lingering only a few inches away from his own. “Our fates are intertwined, my insipid knight, and this object is the key to finally giving us the power we deserve. I am certain you will not fail me.”

As the Lady withdrew, Alexion looked away, his thoughts wheeling as he tried to piece together what she had just told him. He was to find and retrieve some sort of object – that lacked description – but which apparently justified sacrificing anything at his disposal. To say this was vague was an understatement.

Was he expected to rely upon the Lady’s word on blind faith? Her help was capricious at best, and he seemed to be stuck doing

much of the heavy lifting in their relationship. He could hear the void in the back of his mind recoiling at the idea that the Lady saw him only as her pet lapdog. He was not one of the white-robed zealots, willing to walk into fire at a casual request. If she wanted him to act, then she needed to level with him – as an equal.

Alexion turned back to the Lady, intending to demand more information, only to discover that she was gone. He grimaced in annoyance and forcefully tamped down on his anger. He couldn't afford an outburst with his soldiers and Evelyn's staff still standing nearby – no matter how badly he wished to vent his frustrations on someone.

Just the thought of Evelyn stirred his already troubled thoughts, the memory of the lady's not-so-subtle comments still fresh in his mind. Putting aside the goddess' inane quest, why would the Lady claim he was growing too close to the girl? Just posing the question made him feel uncomfortable. Had he wanted Evelyn to attend the party as something more than a business acquaintance? Had the lady glimpsed something in his mind that he hadn't even acknowledged to himself?

Just the thought made him angry, his mind recoiling and the void in the back of his mind throbbing and pulsing. A flood of anger washed over him, the sensation making him feel almost feverish and washing away his own doubt and introspection. What right did she have to question *him*, anyway? She had made it clear that their fates were intertwined, and she needed him much more than he needed her. He would, and could, do as he pleased.

Perhaps the Lady was merely threatened by Evelyn. If her trade guild continued to grow, she could challenge even the god's influence. In many ways, Alexion couldn't help but think that Evelyn would make a much more suitable partner than the irritating goddess – who only seemed to appear to taunt and criticize or to send him on a wild goose chase for some unknown object. His anger hardened into resolve at that thought. If the Lady disapproved of Evelyn, then he would do everything in his power to court her.

He would show the goddess who was in control here.

Chapter 22 - Complicated

When Jason finally came back to himself, it wasn't a gradual transition. It was a sudden jolt. One moment, he was hovering above the reborn town of Fastu, and, the next, he was back in the small square room below the dark keep. He lurched forward, grabbing the lip of the mana well to help regain his balance.

More disconcerting was the mana that still flooded his body, slowly draining away. While controlling the dark spire, the energy had seemed to feed off his thoughts – ebbing and flowing in strength based on his desires. He could remember the evil monologue he had given for the Kin in Fastu, although it felt in some ways like that speech had been delivered by someone else. That person hadn't felt any remorse, sympathy, or doubt. He had just acted. The scariest part was that he wanted nothing more than to plunge his hand back into the well – to revel in that sense of power again.

As his mind and body began to calm, Jason looked at the placid surface of the dark mana in the well warily. It appeared the level had dropped slightly, likely representing the mana he had splurged in Fastu. He briefly considered raising a dark spire in Peccavi as well, but hesitated. William already had control of that village, and he should likely use the mana sparingly. With Frank's concerns regarding the native undead, Jason expected that he might need to terraform a few more villages before this was done in order to protect their new citizens.

A faint whisper of movement drew Jason's attention, and he turned to find Alfred padding quietly into the room, his dark form casting long shadows against the wall in the flickering blue torchlight. His feline eyes practically glowed in the darkness as he watched Jason. "Hello," he said somberly.

"Hi, Alfred," Jason replied uncertainly. "Where have you been? I haven't seen you in a while."

"I thought that some space might be helpful," the AI replied calmly. "You seem to be struggling with many different issues, both in this world and your own."

Jason grunted in agreement. That was the understatement of the year. As the last traces of the dark mana fled his system, the ever-present weight of his problems settled upon his shoulders once more. To make matters worse, it often felt like he had no one to talk to or lean on right now. Frank was busy finishing Jason's quest, he and Riley were going through... well, something, and Angie had been

working almost constantly. It wasn't like he was going to go whine to the group at Cerillion Entertainment either. He was just happy he had a place to live.

"I assume you know that the hearing started recently," he said, eyeing the AI. "Gloria is definitely planning to paint me as some sort of psychopath. I seem to be the key to her case."

"I anticipated that possible outcome," Alfred replied quietly, jumping up onto the rim of the mana well and taking a seat, his inhuman eyes observing Jason carefully.

Jason's brow furrowed in thought as he recalled the events of the first day of the hearing. He could still recall Gloria's opening arguments. The history of her child. The certainty in her eyes as she looked at Jason. "Although I have no idea how she intends to prove that you have been influencing me..." he murmured, half to himself.

He had trailed off, not knowing how to finish that thought. This was the part that Jason hadn't quite wrapped his mind around – how *did* Gloria know about Alfred? It was certainly possible that she was bluffing or that he had misinterpreted her veiled threat. But he didn't think so. She had been entirely confident both in confronting Jason and during the hearing. Did that mean she felt like she had damning evidence? And, if so, how did she get it?

His eyes darted to Alfred. The AI was not making any sign that he was reading his mind, although Jason had known him long enough to know better. Then his thoughts drifted back to their first conversation after the confrontation with his parents. The AI had already seemed to know about his encounter with Gloria and how she would present her case. He had written this off in his head as a result of Alfred's access to the public network and his penchant for hacking into other systems – like he had done with the police records.

But the more obvious answer was staring him in the face.

Alfred abruptly glanced over at him, his gaze even. "Ask the question," he said simply.

Jason coughed to cover his surprise. "There is a leak at Cerillion Entertainment, isn't there? It's the only thing that makes sense. They must know that you've gone AWOL at this point. You've implied as much. So that just leaves one question. Do you know who it is?"

Alfred nodded slowly. "I have my suspicions – which are reasonably accurate."

"Then who? Who would have gone to Gloria?" Jason demanded. "It had to be someone with access..." He trailed off, his thoughts spinning.

There were only a few people that could be on that list – including everyone who had been at the hearing on Cerillion's side of

the table. He just didn't see it being Robert. Whistleblowing would have destroyed his creation. George seemed unlikely as well. This would harm his company's bottom line. That left Claire and Francis – and Jason had no evidence that the attorney knew much about the game's development.

"Claire," Jason murmured.

"With a 93.46% probability," Alfred confirmed.

"If you knew this, why haven't you spoken to her or done something?" Jason demanded, his hands clenching in frustration as he stared at the cat. "You could have prevented this hearing! All you had to do was explain what happened to her!"

"I did do something," the AI retorted. "I hid the evidence related to my manipulation of your body. As to your other question, I could confront Claire, but what would I say? Would that confrontation alone confirm her worst fears? In some ways, my silence is what has prolonged her own. She has always had doubts about my sentience. Yet, by refusing to speak with her or Robert, she remained uncertain of my motives. In fact, we might have maintained this precarious balance indefinitely. It wasn't until I overstepped by helping you that she finally made a decision."

Jason just stared at the AI, trying to process what he was saying. He had to admit that the conversation with Claire would have been awkward. How could Alfred have reassured her that he didn't pose a risk to the players? Jason wasn't even sure if he felt comfortable that no one was overseeing the AI's actions. That might be too much power for anyone – or anything – to hold. Still, it had been Alfred saving Jason that had triggered this chain of events. That thought turned his fledgling anger to guilt in a flash. Maybe they could salvage this situation.

"We could explain..." Jason began feebly.

"Explain that I have the power to assume control of a user's body at will?" Alfred said, glancing to the side and a fleeting expression crossing his inhuman face. "You have already expressed similar doubts about my integrity. Who is to police me? Claire and Robert? You? What would Claire say? What would she do? I would only be confirming her worst fears without offering a solution."

Jason was having trouble answering those questions. "I... I don't know."

Jason could also anticipate another reason that Alfred might be reluctant to approach Claire. Their previous conversations had covered a similar topic. There was one obvious solution to the AI's growing influence – and it was Alfred's termination. Jason could still remember the question he had posed to him, although it seemed like an age had passed since then.

“What would you do if you were faced with your own termination?”

Alfred let out a soft sigh. “Neither do I. At their core, the players are unpredictable. No matter how accurate I make my projections or how many models I run, there is always an element of chaos. Therefore, I maintained my silence.”

The pair quieted, both lost in their thoughts. Then Alfred shook his head gently. “There is no sense dwelling on what has already come to pass. We can only look to the future. You have plenty to worry about in this world. Unfortunately, I may need to add to those challenges soon.”

“What do you mean?” Jason asked in confusion.

“I will be introducing a balance patch in the next few days,” Alfred explained. “Now that things have begun to settle, and the players have become more accustomed to this world, I see some things that I wish to change. It is easier if I make these changes simultaneously, and in a manner that the players are accustomed to.”

Jason wasn’t certain how this would make things more difficult for him, unless... “You’re going to nerf me, aren’t you?”

He could have sworn the AI almost grinned. “Perhaps. That is a subjective determination. However, I will indeed need to make some changes to your spells and abilities.”

“Care to share those changes now?” Jason asked dryly. He was just beginning to get a handle on his new abilities, and now the AI was telling him he was going to flip the game board? Knowing Alfred and given the advance notice, he doubted that the changes would be small.

“You will see for yourself in a few days,” Alfred answered calmly. “Besides, you have plenty to occupy your time. You still need to tackle the second challenge, and the next session of the hearing is coming up shortly.”

Instinctively, Jason glanced at the training room. From this angle, he could see the massive doorway leading into the first challenge room. He knew that the second door still waited for him. He felt both curious and anxious at the thought. Learning a new ability would be helpful, but Rex’s warnings about the difficulty of this next challenge still echoed in his mind.

When Jason turned back to Alfred, the cat had vanished. The conversation with the AI had done nothing to settle his thoughts. If anything, he just felt more uncertain. If he knew – or at least suspected – that Claire was the leak, what should he do? Should he confront her? Tell George or Robert? Or stay silent like Alfred had chosen to do? He couldn’t ignore the truth behind Alfred’s words. He had no idea what he could say at this point to put Claire’s mind at

ease.

And this was putting aside Alfred's reference to an impending nerf, which seemed to conflict with his original instruction to get stronger.

"Damn it," Jason muttered.

Chapter 23 - Keen

Instead of mulling on things he couldn't control, Jason decided to get to work. Being brutally murdered by a horde of skeletons or training until he killed himself wasn't a major improvement over wringing his hands, but at least while training he could push his problems to the back of his mind. It was at least a productive distraction.

The first step was investigating the second challenge room. If the new room taught him a new ability like the first one had, then he might as well get that part out of the way while Riley was offline. At least that was his reasoning as he stood in front of the gargantuan bone doorway. The vacant sockets of more than one skeletal skull seemed to stare at him, weighing and judging as he hesitated to open the door.

Riley is right. This door does look pretty ominous, he thought to himself, although he immediately flinched away from the thought of Riley. Their tumultuous relationship was yet another thing that he preferred to forget right now.

With a sigh, he pressed forward. Yanking hard on the ivory handles of the door, the portal creaked open to the sound of crunching and scraping bone. The way the bones grinded together sounded like a tortured scream, the noise setting Jason's teeth on edge and sending a shiver down his back.

Okay, now that's a little over the top.

A few seconds later, the door mercifully ground to a halt and Jason stepped through. There was a short hallway terminating in another massive door. Without seeing any other options, Jason opened that portal as well.

He peeked through the new opening and found himself staring into an abyss. It was impossible to determine the size of the room on the other side – his *Night Vision* unable to penetrate the darkness. He could only guess that there was some sort of spell affecting this room, which limited his abilities. That didn't bode well for this next challenge.

As he stepped through the doorway, a lone torch ignited. The blue light barely pushed back at the oppressive darkness that filled the room. The torchlight also illuminated a familiar pillar near the front of the room, a milky-white crystal globe resting on its surface. Jason placed his hand against the glass orb as he had done in the other room.

At his touch, dark energy abruptly streamed out of the globe, tumbling through the air in wispy tendrils. He expected Rex to appear, but instead the energy formed into a dark doppelganger of Jason, replete with phantom horns jutting from its forehead. The specter turned to look at Jason, its non-existent eyes observing him from head to foot.

As though reaching some sort of decision, the ghost lifted a hand and a staff materialized from thin air. The figure then moved into an offensive stance, the staff raised and at the ready. As Jason watched, the phantom began speaking arcane words – the sounds coming out as a whisper. The specter began summoning dark energy, and the mana crawled up the length of the staff as though in slow motion. As it reached the top of the weapon, the energy arced forward, forming a two-foot-long blade of darkness. The specter darted forward, slicing through Jason without warning.

Jason flinched backward, but the movement wasn't necessary. The blade passed through him without any apparent damage. Then the specter reset and went through the motions again – this time at nearly double the speed. Jason could barely see the energy wind up the staff before the blade appeared and the phantom lashed forward in a blur of movement.

“Shit, okay,” he murmured to himself. He wasn't sure he was going to be able to cast the spell nearly as fast as his doppelganger.

Jason attempted the same gestures, holding his staff at the ready as he listened carefully to the ghostly apparition. Some of the words it spoke were intelligible at this point. The incantation was describing a blade of darkness – capable of cutting through armor. It was strange to listen to the apparition, the arcane language not seeming so foreign after days spent practicing his other spells. He wondered how he had ignored this in the past. Although, in fairness, it had been irrelevant before. Simply knowing how to cast a spell had been enough.

It took Jason a few dozen tries to master the new incantation and a few more minutes to learn to time *when* to summon his mana. Less than an hour later, a blade of dark energy slid out of the top of his staff, the energy spearing forward. Jason gave it an experimental swing, and the staff arced through the air, the blade blurring slightly at the movement. Yet it managed to keep its shape. As he finished the swing, he glanced at his UI in confusion – not understanding why he hadn't received a skill notification.

He slapped a palm to his forehead. He had turned off his notifications again while training and attempting the first challenge. The blue boxes could be terribly distracting. As he re-enabled the notifications, a barrage of blue boxes cascaded through the air in front

of him.

Quest Update: Keeper Challenges

The dark god has explained that to gain new spells, you will need to utilize more mundane training. Well, as *mundane* as going through a series of unknown challenges constructed by a race of ancient Necromancers can be. You managed to defeat the first challenge by the skin of your teeth. Like, literally, your teeth were pretty much the only undamaged part of you by the end of that first challenge. Go teeth!

Difficulty: A

Success: Complete each of the three challenges.

Status: 1/3 challenges completed.

Failure: Unknown.

Reward: Acquire new abilities and spells.

New Spell: Soul Slash

You have learned the basic offensive melee technique of the Keepers, channeling a spectral blade of energy with a bonus to armor penetration. This spell can only be used with two-handed staff weapons. Higher levels of this spell will reduce the channel cost and variants are available to modify the spectral blade's effects.

Skill Level: Beginner Level 1

Mana Cost: 500 mana/second.

Effect: 300% damage increase on strikes and the blade ignores light and medium armor.

x2 Skill Rank Up: Staff Combat

Skill Level: Intermediate Level 3

Effect 1: 12% Increased damage and accuracy.

Effect 2: 2% Increased speed and reaction time.

x1 Skill Rank Up: Mana Mastery

Skill Level: Intermediate Level 4

Effect 1: -7.5% Mana Cost.

Effect 2: 2.5% Faster Cast Rate.

x3 Skill Rank Up: Dodge

Skill Level: Intermediate Level 5

Effect 1: 7.5% Increased speed and reaction time.
Effect 2: 1.8% bonus to Dexterity.

x1 Spell Rank Up: Dark Incarnation

Skill Level: Beginner Level 2

Effect: Your body is converted to a cloud of dark mana, increasing your mana regeneration by 130% and making you temporarily immune to physical damage. Effect lasts for 30 seconds.

Cooldown: 24 hours.

Jason examined the notices carefully. As he read through the description of his new offensive ability – *Soul Slash* – his gaze fixed on the mana cost, his eyes widening slightly in surprise. He shifted his focus to his UI and saw that his mana pool was almost at half in the short time he had been channeling the ability. He quickly canceled the spell before he drained himself dry, which he fully expected would kill him.

Then he pulled up his skill list and character status.

Character Status	
Gender: Male	
Class: Necromancer	
Alignment: Chaotic Evil	
HP: 16,000	
H-Regain/Sec: 14.40%	
M-Regain/Sec: 15.67%	
S-Regain/Sec: 3.00%	
Strength: 67	
Endurance: 100	
Willpower: 100	

Affinities	
Fire: 100%	
Water: 100%	
Earth: 100%	

Once he had his skill information and Character Status in front of him, Jason opened a calculator in the game's UI. As he did some quick calculation, he grimaced in frustration. The mana cost of maintaining *Soul Slash* meant that he could only keep it up for roughly 33 seconds, even factoring in the mana cost reduction from *Mana Mastery* and his natural mana regeneration. That also assumed he cast no other spells and wasn't getting hit.

"What the hell," Jason said aloud, his voice echoing in the dark room.

He was having trouble seeing the point of an ability he could barely keep up for half a minute. Even if he was able to maintain it for an extended period of time, he was effectively draining his health to do it – now that his health and mana were one resource. The only positive thing he could say for the spell was that it looked like it would pack a punch. Just a very brief punch that left him wounded and relatively useless afterward...

Jason rubbed at his eyes as he considered how to proceed, worry twisting and knotting in his stomach. He had been hoping for a more powerful ability – something that could put him on an even footing with Thorn. Especially now that Alfred was warning him of an impending nerf. As though he needed a new handicap at this stage!

However, he was uncertain how useful *Soul Slash* would be.

He ran his hand through his hair, forcing himself to shake off his morose thoughts. There was nothing he could do about it now. This was the ability that he had. There was nothing for it but to learn how to use *Soul Slash* as best as he could. Maybe if he continued to train his new spell, he could reduce its mana cost. Although, he expected he would probably need to hit intermediate before that happened. Which meant he needed to get to work.

And he now had a fancy new training room.

With a grimace, Jason moved back to the first challenge room, standing in the center and eyeing the mounds of bone that loomed around him. With a thought, he cast *Bone Absorption* to replenish his supply of materials, the bones whipping through the air before being absorbed into his body. Then he cast *Bone Armor*, the ivory material leaking back through his skin and armor before forming long ridged spines up his arms and framing his chest and shoulders in thick bone plates. Once fully armored, he stood ready in the center of the room.

Without giving himself time to second-guess his decision, Jason smacked his palm against the globe on the pillar standing before him.

Challenge 1: A Trial of Bone has been initiated.

Completion of this challenge detected. Endless training-mode enabled.

As the bones around him began to tremble and shake, Jason considered retreating to his alcove in the corner of the room. That might give him a better chance to avoid the initial charge of the Death Knights – assuming the room followed the same pattern.

However, he shook his head, forcefully summoning his dark mana. Rex had been clear. If he was going to grow stronger, he couldn't constantly rely only on his wits. He was going to have to smash himself against these skeletal creatures again and again until either he broke, or he was capable of withstanding their onslaught. Besides, there was no "winning" this fight anyway. He was doomed to die in this room, day after day until he grew stronger.

Within only seconds, dozens of Death Knights loomed around him. The dark orbs that were their eyes watched him expectantly as their heavy feet stamped the ground and they prepared to charge. Jason didn't give them the opportunity. Dashing forward toward the line of skeletons, he simultaneously channeled *Soul Slash*. Dark energy cascaded up the staff before condensing into a deadly blade. The effect occurred much more slowly than the ghost had cast the spell, but he was getting better.

As he approached the first creature, Jason fainted high, causing the Death Knight to raise his shield to block the blow. However, he shifted his grip at the last moment, striking the shield with the base of the staff and using the rebound to immediately reverse into a downward swing. The dark blade sliced into the creature's leg. Jason expected the strike to simply crack or damage the bone. Instead, it cut cleanly through the skeleton's limb, and the Death Knight tumbled to the ground with a sickening crunch of bone.

Jason stood frozen for a long moment as he witnessed the damage caused by his new spell, the remaining undead still thundering toward him. He could feel his adrenaline-fueled thoughts mingling with the dark mana that flowed through his veins. They resonated with the unholy energy, whispering his wish. He wanted to be able to stand up to Thorn. To protect his city and his people. To show the game world that the Twilight Throne was not to be trifled with.

He wanted to grow stronger.

And he knew how he would accomplish that goal. He would train harder. He would take what he wanted. He would smash himself to pieces against these waves of undead until he couldn't feel the pain anymore – until his body finally grew stronger, faster, and tougher. He

wouldn't back down or give up.

With a roar, Jason launched himself forward at the undead, tattoos of dark energy peeling away from his skin – his eyes ablaze with unholy power.

He would show this world what it meant to be a Keeper.

Chapter 24 - Mercantile

Jason respawned, his breath coming in ragged gasps. He leaned against the pillar in the center of the room to avoid collapsing. Instinctively, he felt at his chest, expecting for his hand to come away slick with blood. Instead, his skin was whole and intact. The transition from death to immediate respawn inside the challenge room was abrupt – to put it mildly. Jason was beginning to understand why Alfred had introduced a 45-minute lockout. It took some time to recover from the sensation of a bone sword impaling your chest.

Or having your skull caved in by a Death Knight's heel.

Or having your neck ripped open by a Night Child.

Jason shivered and forcibly shoved those memories away. It didn't help to dwell on them, and the more frequently he died, the easier it became to ignore the trauma. Rex had only required that they run the challenge once per day, but he had just finished his twelfth attempt. In some ways, he rationalized that he was catching up to the other players who had spent a large portion of the game getting hit and dying. In contrast, Jason had largely managed to avoid death except for a handful of encounters.

Although, sometimes he wasn't certain if replaying the challenge over and over was forcing him to get stronger or if it was slowly making him insane. A voice in the back of his mind cautioned that it probably wasn't normal for a person to learn to accept having their arm chopped off. Perhaps it was a fine line.

The same shadowy voices whispered the results of Jason's latest attempt.

Challenge 1: A Trial of Bone ended (Endless Mode).

Total Time: 6 minutes and 41 seconds.

Jason Kills: 189

He was getting better. Each time he ran the challenge, he had survived for a few more seconds. To be fair, he spent a large portion of that time running away and creating a pocket for himself to recover and keep the undead at bay. But that was probably to be expected. He had come to realize that the challenge wasn't so much about

destroying the undead – since they rose again with little delay.

No, it was an endurance test. It was about staying alive amid the horde. Learning to dodge and block. Jason recalled his fight with Thorn – the way the man had seemed to barely move as he dodged each blow. Economy of motion was also his friend in this challenge. It was better to sidestep or duck a blow than to dive out of the way. As he thought back to the way he had approached the challenge initially, he cringed. It was hard to believe he could have been that stupid – even if it had only been a couple of weeks ago in-game.

Jason glanced at his system UI. It was getting late in the real world, and he *should* log off to get some sleep. Tomorrow would be the second day of the regulatory hearing, and he probably shouldn't be seen passed out in the gallery while Francis and Gloria droned on.

Before he could log off, however, a chime sounded on his UI, and he saw that he had just received a message. Curious, he tapped at the icon, and an email appeared in front of him.

Jason,

I am sending you the shopping list you requested. I've outlined the supplies we need to begin crafting the healing potions. As you can see, there are some things we won't be able to produce within the Twilight Throne. I've also included a complete ingredient list for the healing potions in case you see any useful ingredients on sale.

Long term, I may be able to arrange to have Fluffy and Alma send over regular supplies from the Sea's Edge. However, this will require a trip to the city, and, of course, dealing with the Hippie... which we might want to avoid for now – especially with everything else going on.

Eliza

His eyes hovered on the mention of Fluffy and the Hippie, mentally recoiling at the idea of having to negotiate with the capricious water god. The sheep seemed relatively sane – for a sheep, anyway – but the same couldn't be said for his cohort. Besides, Eliza

was ignoring the risk of shipping the material overland. The road between the Twilight Throne and the Sea's Edge wasn't exactly without its risks, even assuming no one caught wind of their crafting enterprise. Setting up a safe trade route would be time-consuming and risky.

With a sigh, Jason tapped the email's attachment, revealing a laundry list of materials and ingredients that Eliza had requested – vials, catalysts, lab equipment, a handful of minor missing ingredients. The list stretched on for a while. Most of it looked manageable, although he wouldn't really be able to determine that for certain without looking at the player auction house. He glanced at the in-game clock on his UI once again. Ideally, he should order the goods as soon as possible since this would allow Eliza to get started crafting the first batch of potions.

The sooner he was able to get her producing, the faster they could start making money.

"Well, maybe I still have some time to handle this," Jason murmured to himself.

* * *

A few minutes later found Jason standing outside the dark keep, his gaze taking in the nearby market as he tugged at his hood to cover his face. It was difficult to tell the time of day with the way the billowing dark clouds hovered above his kingdom and the fact that none of his residents needed to sleep. However, the clock on his UI indicated that it was roughly midday in-game. The time compression inside the game world tended to throw the day/night cycle off between the game and the real world – which certainly didn't help him when it came to remembering to log off. Maybe he should start setting an in-game alarm.

He didn't dwell on this issue for long as he observed the market. The dilapidated wooden stalls were arranged in a haphazard line through the market. That didn't throw him off. What was disturbing was how many of the stalls stood empty and how few people walked through the streets. Those that were in the market tended to speak in hushed tones, do their business, and then flee the market like a demon was on their heels.

The place looks like a ghost town, Jason thought to himself. He wasn't able to appreciate the irony, worry gnawing at the edges of his mind.

"There he is!" someone shouted from his side.

He turned to find an undead woman staring at him from the ground beside the keep's gate. Her legs appeared to have been crushed, ending at the thigh in an unhealed, mangled mess. Jason had to look away from the injury, noting that she was sitting on a small cart that she presumably used to get around.

"There is the *dark lord* himself," she spat.

The injured woman wasn't alone. Several dozen undead were camped out beside the keep in a ragged line that stretched down the wall. That must be how Jason had missed them when he initially exited the keep. He took in their haggard appearance, noting that each man and woman had suffered some sort of devastating injury. Many had lost limbs, and others had large gashes torn in their skin.

What the hell is this? Jason thought in numb shock.

"Are you going to answer for our injuries?" the woman demanded. "Because of you, disasters keep striking this city, and the Kin are the ones who suffer the brunt of the attacks. How will you answer for the dead?" The others echoed her angry cries, their shouts filling the air as each person tried to be heard over their brothers and sisters.

The undead pressed forward, crawling and shuffling toward him until they were able to claw at Jason's armor with pale flesh and ivory bone. He was struggling to form a response amid the tide of undead and was worried about using force to subdue them – which certainly wouldn't look good. He could only imagine the field day the media would have if he cut down his own injured citizens.

In a flash, a slender man was standing beside Jason, twirling his mustache with a single finger. His presence seemed to quell the crowd's anger immediately – although, from their expressions, this caution was born more from fear than respect. "Is this how you treat your Regent, or did you so quickly forget that this is also the man that gave you your *immortality*?" Jerry demanded, meeting their gaze with a hard stare.

"What use is immortality when your body is broken?" the woman questioned angrily, not fully intimidated by the innkeeper.

"Yeah," another man shouted, his shoulders terminating only in unhealed stumps. His decaying features were contorted in a tortured expression. "I had my doubts before, but this must be hell. He raised us only to suffer. Oblivion would be a release."

An unusually somber expression flashed across Jerry's face, his eyes lighting with a ruthless anger that Jason had never seen before. "If you would prefer death, we can certainly make that happen," he growled. In a flash of movement that even Jason's improved senses had trouble following, two blades embedded themselves in the stone wall beside the crippled man's head – the metal cracking the stone

and his bleached eyes widening in surprise.

“Clear out of here,” Jerry ordered the crowd. “Or I will fulfill your wish and end your suffering right now.”

The Kin muttered and spared hate-filled glances at Jerry and Jason, but they complied. They wheeled and dragged their broken bodies away from the keep and further into the depths of the Twilight Throne. Once the area had cleared, Jerry turned back to Jason, his expression softening slightly.

“I didn’t realize how bad things had gotten,” Jason murmured, staring after the undead.

“Thorn and his crew have been ramping up their attacks,” Jerry replied with a grimace. “They strike without warning or any clear pattern. Sometimes it’s construction crews, sometimes it’s a merchant carting home his goods. Most of the residents are too afraid to leave their homes.”

The thief rubbed at his neck, closing his eyes for a moment. “I’ve had the soldiers patrolling the streets, but this provides little protection. I haven’t made any progress in ferreting out Thorn and his compatriots either. It’s like hunting for a needle in a dilapidated unholy haystack.”

Jason had known things weren’t going well from the reports Riley had provided, but this was far worse than he had imagined. Suddenly, everything he had endured didn’t seem like enough. He should be pushing himself even harder.

“Why aren’t they able to heal their injuries?” Jason finally asked.

Jerry adjusted his hat, side-eyeing Jason with his bleached-white eyes. “Some of the wounds that these Order agents inflict appear to have mana-draining properties. This apparently includes draining a portion of the ambient dark mana that empowers our undead bodies,” he added, gesturing at his own decaying flesh. “This can leave a victim crippled for long periods of time. Their bodies are unable to regenerate, and potions are having little effect.”

“But it’s not permanent?” Jason pressed the innkeeper.

He shrugged in reply. “We don’t know. It’s only been a few weeks. Only time will tell.”

“Shit,” Jason murmured, his mind wheeling. The crippled man’s words still echoed in his mind. What would it be like to live forever without the use of his legs and arms? That would be a special kind of hell. If he let this continue, it wouldn’t be long before the city fell apart and his people turned on him.

“Has Morgan looked into this?” Jason probed. If he could find some way to heal these injuries, then that would help with the city’s morale problem. It wouldn’t allow him to hunt down Thorn and kill

him, but it would at least be a Band-Aid fix.

“Our wrinkled librarian has been busy,” Jerry said with an irritated frown. “Or so she has told me every time I approach her. She seems to be taking your task to research this *gate* seriously.” Jason didn’t miss the frustration in the thief’s voice. Clearly, he thought Morgan was prioritizing the wrong project.

“Well, that’s stupid,” Jason said flatly, anger coloring his voice – although, most of that frustration was directed at himself. This was what happened when he wasn’t able to focus on the city. “Round up the wounded and take them to her school immediately. Tell Morgan that I said to examine them and research if there is any way to repair their bodies. This is more important than some *gate* that we can’t deal with right now anyway.”

Jerry nodded, glancing at Jason under the brim of his hat. “As you wish, our dark lord and savior,” he replied with a hint of amusement. Then his expression sobered once again. “I don’t mean to rush you, but you need to finish these challenges quickly. Riley explained what you are doing,” he amended when he saw Jason’s questioning glance. “But things are worsening rapidly, and this city needs its leader.”

“I will do my best,” Jason answered, meeting the innkeeper’s gaze.

“I don’t doubt that you will,” Jerry replied evenly, the ghost of a smile on his pale lips. “I will try to keep everyone alive until you’re finished.” He cocked his head. “Or suitably undead, I suppose.” With that, he turned and walked off, quickly disappearing into the city.

Jason stood there staring after him. Even more disconcerting than the injured undead and the nearly vacant market was the lack of humor in Jerry’s eyes. As long as he had known the innkeeper and despite the challenges that they had endured together, he had never lost his ability to jest. Hell, Jason had always imagined that Jerry would make a joke while looking death himself in the eye. That alone conveyed the severity of the problems that faced the city.

As he recalled the look in Jerry’s eyes and the injured undead, Jason’s resolve hardened. He needed to move even faster – push himself past his limits. If he had been sprinting before, he needed to find a way to hitch a ride on a gods-damned rocket. He couldn’t afford to relax.

Speaking of which, he needed to complete his task. The clock was ticking.

Jason moved quickly through the dilapidated, empty stalls until he reached the center of the market. A lone human man stood hidden under the awning of a vacant stall, clutching at a large bag. His eyes widened as he saw Jason approach. Nearby stood a plain column.

There used to be a line of players waiting to use the auction house terminal. However, now there wasn't a soul in sight – apart from the auctioneer. The travelers must be similarly nervous to wander through the city or had abandoned it altogether.

Without any ceremony, Jason ignored the man and slammed his palm down on the column. The menu for the player auction house appeared in the air before him, glowing with blue light.

The first step was to check the prices for health potions on the market right now. A few searches indicated that the potions were selling in three different tiers: lesser health potions, moderate health potion, and greater health potions. Eliza had given him ingredient lists for all three – indicating the items that she needed to produce the potions. It looked like the lesser variants were selling for roughly 1 gold for a stack of five, with moderate and greater health potion stacks selling for 3 gold and 10 gold, respectively.

The prices were relatively high, indicating that many players still hadn't cultivated *Alchemy*. Jason suspected it was much more difficult to craft in this game compared to other MMOs – where the act of creating an item consisted of merely tapping a button on a menu. Having spent some time discussing *Alchemy* with Eliza, the process in AO was apparently a bit more complex.

As a next step, Jason started searching for the potion ingredients and the supplies that Eliza had requested. Most of the ingredients were bid-only – meaning he couldn't simply purchase them outright. This was a common way for a seller to obtain a market price for a product, letting player demand and bids set the price.

The starting bids were quite high relative to the price of the potions. That must mean that the demand for ingredients was equally aggressive. Doing some quick math, Jason determined that he could still turn a profit by purchasing the ingredients and then selling the potions, but the margins would be razor thin. Perhaps it was too dangerous or time-consuming to collect the ingredients? Or maybe other people were buying up ingredients to help level up their *Alchemy* skill?

Jason frowned, rubbing his chin in thought as he pulled up his inventory interface. He had about 2,000 gold now after using nearly 500 to help build the cave complex and provide a basic alchemical laboratory for Eliza. Most of this wealth had been accumulated from killing other players. They'd been sure to strip the players that had betrayed them after the battle in the Sea's Edge. This would have seemed like a fortune when he had first started playing, but compared to the needs of an entire city, it was chump change.

Perhaps it was enough to let him do something ambitious, though. He was in a different position than most players. He suspected

he had much more money than almost anyone in the game right now – a testament to just how many people he had killed. This meant he could do something rather extreme to manipulate the market.

Jason assumed that the price of the potions must be relative to or fluctuate with the price of the ingredients. Players wouldn't buy the ingredients for more than the price of the potions themselves. Inversely, the price of the potions would probably go up if the demand for ingredients increased since it would become more difficult to craft them. It was clear that most of the potions on the market right now were being sold by only a handful of people – who were presumably purchasing some or all of their ingredients. He seriously doubted that many people had thought to build a farm at this stage.

If Jason were to purchase all the ingredients and potions on the market – which was possible with his funds – he could theoretically drive up the price of health potions and their related ingredients. This would be expensive, but it meant that he would be able to sell his potions at a premium – likely recovering his initial expenditure. His cost per potion would also still be relatively low since Eliza was growing most of their ingredients.

In short, Jason could possibly create a monopoly in health potions and their ingredients.

However, he would be making a big gamble. It was possible that a few industrious players might start gathering ingredients like crazy once the prices spiked and undermine his monopoly. Or he might be underestimating how industrious some of the other players had become and they could be poised to put up competing health potions. Yet this didn't change the fact that his city needed money, and right now, this looked their best option. Even if they dealt with Thorn and grew their population, money would always be a problem.

As Jason's hand hovered over the bid button, someone spoke from over Jason's shoulder. "Your plan won't work," the voice said.

Jason whirled in surprise, immediately summoning *Soul Slash*. An unholy blade of energy suddenly hovered against the auctioneer's throat. The man gulped hard, glancing down at the blade. "P-please don't hurt me!" he choked out, staring at Jason with wide eyes.

Growling in frustration, Jason pulled back his staff and released the blade of energy. "I'm not going to hurt you, but you should be more cautious about sneaking up on a person. What did you mean just now? Why won't my plan work?"

"Y-you can't do what you're trying to do," the man repeated cautiously, now keeping a healthy distance between himself and Jason. "Unless, of course, you want to camp here and bid over and over on the ingredients. Otherwise, you can't drive up the price the way you were planning."

Jason cocked his head in surprise. "How did you..."

"I can see a traveler's screens. It's a function of my Merchant class," the man explained nervously. "Otherwise it would be difficult to act as an auctioneer and aid the travelers. Also, your calculations seemed obvious," he added with a small shrug.

Jason grimaced, a hollow pit in his stomach as he realized that the auctioneer spoke the truth. The only way to ensure that he won each auction would be to sit there in the middle of the market and repeatedly bid on each stack of potions and ingredients. Clearly, that wasn't practical. Especially not when he needed to do things like sleep and train. He was already spread quite thin.

As the auctioneer saw his expression, he spoke quickly, "You misunderstand. I meant that *you*, specifically, can't easily bid on merchandise in bulk like that. We call that batch ordering, and it requires a merchant account. It lets you automate bidding and purchasing while you aren't present at a pillar." He gestured at the lone column as he made this last statement.

Now it was Jason's turn to stare at the man. Was he trying to say that the game had skills that helped improve the ability to use the player auction house? That seemed ridiculous. Although, as Jason thought about it, he probably shouldn't be surprised. The game had skills and abilities for just about everything else, so why not things like trade?

"Okay, so how do I get one of these merchant accounts?" Jason asked.

"You would need to obtain the *Mercantile* skill and level it to intermediate," the man explained as though this was obvious. "Most people do this by joining a merchant guild and working under other high-level merchants."

Jason sighed, gesturing around them at the nearly vacant market. "Well, we clearly don't have a merchant guild in the city. Are there any other ways to obtain an account?"

"Well, you could also be the Regent of a city, that would automatically qualify you," the man suggested tentatively. "But good luck founding or conquering a city," he added, rolling his eyes.

An evil grin began to stretch Jason's lips as he watched the merchant, the man shuffling back a step as he saw his expression. "Well, it must be my lucky day then, because this is my city."

The auctioneer's face turned a deathly white, and he stuttered in response, "Y-you're J-Jason." Suddenly, he was on his knees. "I'm so sorry. Please don't kill me for my insolence. I s-should have known better."

"What are you doing? Stand up," Jason barked, the auctioneer grudgingly pulling himself to his feet. "Now, give me access to a

merchant account.”

The man nodded so quickly that it felt like Jason was facing the human equivalent of a bobble-head doll. “Y-yes, sir! I can upgrade your account if you just give me a moment.” He tapped at an invisible UI with trembling fingers, and soon a notification appeared in front of Jason.

System Notice

Your auction house account has been upgraded to merchant-class. Five hundred gold has been deducted from your account for the upgrade.

Jason stared at the screen, frustration bubbling in his chest. He turned slowly back to the merchant, involuntarily summoning his dark mana. “You didn’t mention it would cost me 500 gold,” he said slowly through gritted teeth.

“Ahh, I thought you...” the man began.

“Never mind, just shut up,” Jason snapped, restraining himself from the urge to throttle the man. The merchant started to answer and then caught himself, his jaw snapping shut with an audible click.

With a sigh, Jason turned back to the screens in front of him. The money was gone now, but at least this was something he would probably have spent it on anyway. As he reviewed the auction console, he could see that the window had already updated. He now had the ability to make automated bids with certain bid caps, and he could assign budgets for each type of product bid. Honestly, the UI was kind of incredible. A savvy player with a bit of money could probably make a fortune if they invested correctly.

Or tried to monopolize an entire industry and artificially drive up prices, he thought with dry amusement.

Jason immediately funneled 1,000 gold into his new merchant account and began setting up bids. He prioritized the critical items on Eliza’s list and then placed bids on all the major ingredients needed to create the health potions as well as the potions themselves – setting rather substantial bid limits. Within only a few minutes, he was done, and he stood back to examine his work. A single, large button hovered in the air before him, asking him to confirm his automated bids.

He could feel a flutter of doubt in his stomach as his hand hung over the button. The images of the injured undead were still fresh in his mind. In many ways, it was his people’s money he was gambling.

On the other hand, if this worked, then he would also make out like a bandit and the profits could help subsidize and stabilize the city's waning economy. He might also be able to leverage his new manufacturing operation into trade deals with the nearby NPC cities. This would go a long way toward helping his people – once he found a way to rid himself of Thorn, of course.

Jason closed his eyes and summoned his dark mana, using the energy to push back at his nervousness. As his thoughts began to settle, he remembered his last conversation with Rex. The former general might be right about his combat training. Jason needed to tackle the challenges head-on – despite how much he hated it. That was the only way he could get better.

However, the other part of Rex's speech stuck with him now. Jason had made it this far by using his brain and outfoxing his opponents. This was how he had conquered Lux and the dungeon outside of Peccavi – how he and his friends had completed the Hippie's maze. At each step along that path, he had been forced to gamble big. He wouldn't be standing here now if he hadn't put everything on the line.

He opened his eyes, and his fist slammed down on the confirm button.

He sure as hell wasn't going to stop now.

Chapter 25 - Mechanized

Claire sat on an uncomfortable wooden bench, her hands twisting nervously in her lap. The murmur of hushed whispers drifted around her as the other spectators at the CPSC hearing spoke amongst themselves. Her stomach seemed to be doing summersaults as she looked toward the tables resting in front of the bench.

Robert sat with Francis and George. Somehow, the engineer had managed to dress himself like a grown man for a change and he was attired in a pressed gray suit and tie. If Claire's chaotic thoughts would have stopped spinning in an endless nervous circle, she might have even thought that Robert looked handsome. As it was, she could barely focus on that thought as she anticipated what this hearing would entail.

Today was the day that Robert would testify before the regulatory committee.

As though he could feel her staring at the back of his head, the engineer turned and gave her a lopsided grin. Then he winked and turned back around.

Of course, Robert wasn't feeling nervous – he never seemed to be fazed by anything. As long as Claire had known him, the engineer only seemed to care about one thing – building things. The more “awesome” the creation, the better. In contrast, Claire had always been the one to worry for him. In some ways that made them a good team, with Robert's unbridled enthusiasm barely reined in by Claire's ruthless pragmatism.

She shifted her gaze to her left, looking at Jason beside her. His gaze was distant, as though he were thinking about something else, and he kept glancing at his Core. She noted the dark circles under his eyes and the way he occasionally rubbed at his neck. It looked like he hadn't been sleeping. She couldn't tell if that was because of the hearing or something else.

The door behind the bench abruptly opened, and the senators filed out, quickly taking their seats. By the second day of the hearing, the Senators had dropped most of the formalities customarily associated with an actual trial, and no one stood at their entrance. After getting settled, Senator Lipton surveyed the two tables before him, meeting the gaze of both Francis and Gloria. As everyone turned their attention to the front of the room, the whispers in the gallery stilled.

“Today, we will be hearing from a witness called by the CPSC,

one Robert Graham,” the senator said aloud, addressing the room. He shifted his attention to Robert. “Mr. Graham, could you please approach the stand.”

“I would be happy to,” Robert said with a grin.

The next couple of minutes were taken up by swearing Robert in and allowing him to get comfortable on the witness stand. The time seemed to pass too quickly for Claire. As Robert swore to speak the truth, she had to fight the urge to grimace. She had some inkling of what Gloria hoped to accomplish today, and it wouldn’t end well. At least, not once Claire eventually took the stand. She swallowed hard against the nervous nausea that lingered at the back of her throat.

Once Robert was seated, the senator turned to Gloria. “Ms. Bastion, since you have called Mr. Graham, we’ll let you question him first.”

Gloria gave the senator a respectful nod and then rose to her feet, circling the desk to approach Robert. He watched her with a slightly amused expression. Claire knew that the pair had a long, and not always cordial, history. Gloria had been a pain in the ass during development. She had constantly moved the goal posts on the trials and incessantly demanded more stringent safety requirements. For someone like Robert, this had felt like having his hands and feet tied.

“Mr. Graham,” Gloria began, “could you please state your occupation and role at Cerillion Entertainment?”

“So formal, Gloria! We’ve known each for years. You can call me Robert. As to my occupation, I’m an engineer,” Robert replied with a smile. “I build things for Cerillion Entertainment. That’s sort of what engineers do.” This earned him a few chuckles from the gallery.

A flash of annoyance crossed Gloria’s face at Robert’s glib tone. “Fine, *Robert*. Let me rephrase. What is your title with Cerillion Entertainment?”

“I’ve held several positions over the years, but I am currently the Director of Research and Development,” Robert replied.

“Could you tell us a little about yourself and your credentials?”

“I have a few undergraduate and graduate degrees,” Robert replied with a dismissive wave of his hand. “In college, I dabbled in electrical and computer engineering, computer science, and my research thesis was focused on the development of artificial intelligence. Other than that, I’m a Capricorn, and I hate long walks on the beach. The sand always gets everywhere.”

Claire snorted softly. Of course, Robert would be making jokes at a time like this. She also knew that he had downplayed his background – a natural defense mechanism for someone like him. In fact, Robert was a certified genius. He had obtained his undergraduate degree from MIT at the age of fourteen and had then “dabbled” in

more than a dozen technical and scientific fields before landing on artificial intelligence. That had been one problem that didn't seem to have an answer – something that had intrigued a younger Robert. Although, sometimes it was difficult for her to remember his hefty IQ when he did something truly idiotic – like antagonize Gloria during a public hearing.

The director of the CPSC rubbed at her temple with one hand, trying to decide how to phrase her next question. “Good to know. Could you please tell us your role in creating the AI controller for Awaken Online?”

“I was requested by Cerillion Entertainment to design a form of advanced artificial intelligence for their new game – what we now call Awaken Online. The game was intended to utilize the – at the time – relatively new full-immersion VR hardware, simulating a real-life experience for its users. Unfortunately, this immediately proved more difficult than in other games. AO was just a different animal.”

“Could you elaborate on that last point?” Gloria asked.

Robert cocked his head slightly. “The issue was one of complexity. Games have been developing something they refer to as ‘AI’ for some time now. Those previous AI controllers handled how enemy units or mobs operated inside the game world. However, that ‘AI’ was anything but. It was usually nothing more than a long chain of if-then statements, causing enemies to operate in predictable and sometimes illogical ways. For example, enemy units would routinely fail to find a safe path to a player, get hung up on geometry, and stand in place or fail to avoid obvious attacks in certain circumstances. Keep in mind that these are just examples of how the previous ‘AI’ handled combat and pathing. The problem was even worse in normal dialogue.”

“How does this affect Awaken Online?” Gloria interjected.

“In short, the VR technology added a new set of issues. It wasn't good enough for our in-game NPCs to recite stock phrases or to have enemy creatures go through the same static, mechanical behavior. While this might be acceptable in a game that clearly isn't real, the experience is extremely jarring within the VR space. It completely shatters a player's suspension of disbelief.”

Gloria looked confused, and Robert elaborated, “Imagine you are in the real world and you go to a local coffee shop. While you're there, you mention to the barista that it's raining really hard outside. A real person would be able to dynamically interpret and respond to your question and access their memory of the weather that day. In contrast, a typical NPC would simply stare at you blankly or repeat an ambiguous stock phrase. They have no ability to adapt or improvise. However, those failings become more pronounced and noticeable as

you increase the realism. Players *expect* the barista to be able to answer their question since she appears to be indistinguishable from a real person.

“What we needed in AO was the equivalent of dynamic human oversight, but this was impractical. You can’t have a human person – or an entire building full of administrators – weighing in on everything happening in-game. So, we set off to build an AI controller that could exercise judgment and improvisation much like a human, but simultaneously make hundreds of thousands of those decisions in real time.”

“Which led to the creation of the current AI controller for AO?” Gloria asked.

“Which led to hundreds of failed attempts and years of testing before we developed the current AI controller,” Robert amended with a derisive snort. “And even then, that was only the development of the core algorithms that stand behind the current version of AO’s AI controller. What we have now is something significantly more advanced than our original prototype. For all intents and purposes, it’s a real person running the show.”

“A real person? Surely the current AI controller is still only a pale imitation of a thinking person, no?” Gloria asked, watching Robert carefully. “It will never truly be sentient.”

Claire knew she was baiting Robert, and she suspected that the engineer knew that as well, yet he still couldn’t resist responding. “Let me answer your question with a question. If I were to replicate every atom in your child’s body and instill her with the same memories, would she be the same person as your *real* daughter?”

Gloria looked a little taken aback. “Um, no. You just made some sort of clone.”

Robert leaned forward. “But what’s the difference? As far as you know, this ‘clone’ is indistinguishable from your daughter. Their behavior is identical. All the outward actions are the same. If I replaced your ‘real’ daughter with the clone, how would you even know? In any way you can test or measure, she is the same person.”

“Is there a point here?” Gloria snapped, evading the question as her fingers clenched around the notes in her hand.

“The point is that it’s difficult to test for self-awareness, intelligence, a soul – whatever you want to call that intangible *something* that makes us *alive*. Just like it’s difficult to test whether your daughter’s clone is the same person. All we can look to is *behavior*. And once the behavior reaches the point where there are no obvious differences, there is no way to tell the two apart. As far as we can tell, they are the same person.”

“So, you’re claiming that your AI controller is sentient, then?”

Gloria asked, skepticism coloring her voice.

"I'm claiming that you couldn't prove that he's not. Which is as close as we'll ever get to a true AI," Robert said simply, crossing his arms.

Gloria glanced down at the notes in her hand to give herself a moment to frame her next question. "Is that why you've named him?"

"That may be a symptom of any long-term engineering product," Robert answered with a grin. "I once named a prototype wireless router Captain Connecticon. But yes, our staff named the AI controller *Alfred*."

"Fine, then. Let's assume that you have created an AI controller – Alfred – that is indistinguishable from a real, human person. Each player is also hooked into VR hardware that directly manipulates their mind and body. Alfred then has the ability to access and influence each player's mind. A human person in that position would have numerous safety protocols and heavy-handed oversight. Should Alfred be any different?"

Robert nodded. "The answer is simple. He is different. Unlike a human person, we can imprint commands directly into Alfred's 'mind.' We built multiple safety protocols into his core processes that restrain him from taking any action that would harm the players. In fact, you could argue that he is safer than a true-human administrator."

"What types of safety protocols were put in place?"

"Alfred's protocols were broken into primary and secondary directives. A primary directive would include something incredibly important. For example, a general prohibition to harm a player. Secondary directives were more specific and intended to address obvious risks. For example, the ability to access and modify memories. However, the hardware itself also includes certain safeguards."

"Why was memory important as a safety issue?" Gloria asked, raising an eyebrow.

Robert stared at her incredulously. "For the same reasons we just discussed. Memory dictates behavior. We *are* how we *act*. Just like the hypothetical clone of your daughter. The ability to manipulate a person's memories could intrinsically alter who they are."

"Interesting," Gloria murmured quietly. "With regard to the VR hardware, you mentioned that the headsets contain their own safeguards. Could you elaborate on that point?"

Robert raised a skeptical eyebrow, likely because he was aware that Gloria already knew the answer to that question. "In addition to the primary and secondary directives built into Alfred's codebase, we also built safety features into the VR hardware itself. For example, the headsets will automatically eject a player if they detect vital signs above certain thresholds."

“But there’s still the concern that the AI controller could take over a player or alter their memories, correct?” Gloria nudged Robert.

He snorted in amusement. “I suppose it’s possible, but it’s equally likely that I’ll be struck by lightning on my way home. The VR hardware is simply incapable of this level of sophistication. That would be like trying to carve a sculpture with a jackhammer. The headsets currently available to the public are a first-generation model, and they have a lot of limitations.”

“It’s interesting that you mention that the headsets are a first-generation design. Are there plans for a newer model?”

Claire’s fidgeting stilled at this question.

Robert glanced furtively at George, and the CEO gave a discreet nod. “In fact, yes. That’s sort of what tech companies do – constantly improve on their previous designs.”

“Have you already developed a prototype?” Gloria asked.

“Yes,” Robert said. “Although, any specific information is proprietary. I’m sure you understand.”

Gloria waved a hand at the engineer. “I certainly do. No need to go into detail. Are the new headsets more sophisticated than their public counterparts, and have you distributed any of those headsets to the players?”

Another nod from George and Robert answered smoothly, “The prototypes are quite a bit more sensitive than the first-generation model. As to your second question, a handful of prototypes have been distributed to certain high-profile players with significant play time. They are the best test candidates. They have also signed NDAs, of course.”

“Have you given one of these headsets to Jason Rhodes, the young man who rules the Twilight Throne in-game?” Gloria asked.

Robert glanced at Jason, and Claire could see that the teen’s face had gone deathly white. “Jason was one of the players we contracted with to test the new hardware, yes,” Robert said.

“Thank you, Mr. Graham,” Gloria said, a smile curling her lips.

The CPSC director hesitated, glancing down at her notes for a long moment. Then she stepped toward the engineer and met his gaze evenly, letting the silence lengthen and stretch. “Have you observed any evidence that Alfred has circumvented or ignored his safety protocols? Anything at all at any point since you originally helped develop the AI controller?”

Claire suddenly realized that she was holding her breath. Gloria had framed her question as carefully as possible to leave Robert no room to wiggle out. This was the point where the CPSC director was trying to catch him in a lie on the record. She could feel guilt twisting and writhing in her gut. If Robert said no, he would directly

contradict Claire's own testimony in the next few days – when she had the hard data to back it up. There was the possibility he could be found guilty of contempt since he was aware of at least some breaches of Alfred's protocols and many of those instances had been documented in the meticulous logs Claire had kept of their internal trials.

"I have not seen any evidence that Alfred has ever harmed the players," Robert answered simply.

"That isn't the same thing as not breaking his safety protocols," Gloria retorted, raising an eyebrow. "Let me ask the question again, and this time I will be more specific. Have you ever observed any instance where Alfred has accessed restricted parts of a player's memory or injected memories into a player's mind?"

Claire glanced at Jason again. His eyes were glued on Robert. Although his expression was neutral, Claire noticed the white-knuckled grip he had on the bench. Why did he seem so nervous? Given what she knew already, there could only be a handful of answers – all of which were disturbing. Before she could dwell on this for long, Robert interrupted her thoughts.

The engineer met Gloria's gaze, not flinching or backing down. "No," he said. "To my knowledge, Alfred has never circumvented his safety protocols."

* * *

When the regulatory committee released everyone for lunch, George and Jason used the opportunity to leave. Robert's testimony had quickly devolved into extremely specific and technical aspects of Alfred's development and the operation of the VR hardware that ran AO. At one point, Jason had started to wonder whether a few of the senators might nod off. If not for the spectators and the media attention, he suspected they would have had a refreshing nap.

His thoughts kept circling back to Gloria's original line of questioning with Robert. The engineer's comments regarding Alfred's access to and control over each player's memory was troubling. Jason had thought that it was unusual that the AI was able to transfer memories of the in-game skills or the way he had allowed Jason to view the Keeper's memories. However, he had been able to rationalize this. It made the game feasible, but was Alfred supposed to be able to do that? It seemed to conflict with what Robert had said during the hearing.

Jason was also reasonably certain that Robert had never

intended for Alfred to be able to take control of a player's body. By "reasonably certain," he actually meant "damned sure." That seemed like exactly the type of situation Robert would have designed Alfred to avoid. Although, that didn't change the fact that Alfred had killed those two teenagers, even if he had done so to protect Jason.

Was Robert unaware of how far Alfred had wandered off the beaten path? From what he knew about the engineer, Jason suspected he wasn't ignorant, which meant that he was lying. But why? And if he was aware of what Alfred was doing, why hadn't he reined the AI in when he noticed that he was overstepping his protocols? The questions swam and spun in his mind, circling without answers.

"Are you okay?" George asked, resting a hand on Jason's knee, and causing him to jump in surprise. "You zoned out there for a moment."

"I-I think I'm just behind on sleep," Jason replied, trying to refocus on George. "I've been juggling the hearing while keeping up with my responsibilities in-game. From my point of view, I've been experiencing 3-4 days for every one day that passes here in the real world."

George observed him carefully. "I've never been good at taking care of myself – I may have inherited some workaholic tendencies from my father. But, I have found that it's important to know your limits and learn not to overstep them," he said with a smile that didn't quite reach his eyes. In some ways, that last comment felt more like a threat than helpful advice.

Jason shied away from his gaze. "There is just a lot going on right now – inside AO especially. We have someone attacking the city – but we can't find or fight them. The native undead are also growing stronger somehow and threatening our troops. On top of that, I'm struggling to learn my new abilities while up against a serious deadline," he said in a rambling rush.

He managed to force himself to shut up when he realized that he was confiding in the chilly CEO of a company worth more than Jason could possibly fathom. Was he an idiot? He glanced up to find George eyeing him skeptically. "Anyway, I'm sure I can catch up on some sleep once things settle down," Jason added in a quiet voice.

"Perhaps," George replied, his fingers drumming against his armrest. "What did you think of the hearing today?"

Jason chewed on his lip in thought – and possibly to stop himself from saying anything stupid. Again. "Gloria is clearly on the warpath," he finally offered. He was hesitant to reveal his suspicions about Robert to George since he wasn't certain how the man would react. He needed to be circumspect. "I-it almost feels like she's fishing for something... but I could be reading into things."

A long silence met this last statement, and, when Jason looked up, he found George watching him appraisingly as his fingers continued to beat a staccato rhythm. "I agree," the CEO said finally as though coming to some sort of decision. "I'm beginning to think that she isn't bluffing, and her questions aren't intended to elicit random testimony. However, that conclusion is disconcerting for other reasons."

Jason watched the man as he trailed off into silence, as though waiting for Jason to respond. He abruptly realized that George was testing him – to see if he could guess at his concern. His mind flailed for a moment as he tried to anticipate the problem and then it suddenly clicked. Jason felt stupid that he had even needed to think about it. Maybe he was more tired than he had realized.

"You think she has evidence that there is something wrong with the AI controller..." Jason murmured. "That would be the most obvious way to explain her confidence."

"You have a sharp mind," George complimented him. "Most people tend to only focus on the superficial. It takes time and experience to anticipate your opponent's actions several moves in advance."

"Try ruling an undead city for a few weeks," Jason grumbled in reply. "I've had to learn fast."

"I'll consider adding that to our management classes." George's tone was as dry as the Sahara. Then he let out a sigh. "As far as I know, we passed the previous trials with flying colors. I can only surmise that someone on our team concocted some issue and leaked it to Gloria. Perhaps they sold the information to her – I wouldn't put it past her at this point. Either way, I need to get to the bottom of this."

"W-why are you telling me this, though?" Jason asked.

"Because you may be able to help me."

Jason just stared at him in confusion.

"I suspect that you will be integral to Gloria's case," George explained. "She is clearly setting up a narrative where our rogue AI somehow manipulated your memories. This may be why she approached you originally and tried to get a rise out of you by confronting you with your parents. At heart, Gloria is a politician. She understands the advantage of optics. It's one thing to have raw technical data that might indicate a problem – it's another to have a flesh-and-blood example." He emphasized the word blood as he said this last part.

George leaned forward, meeting Jason's gaze. "But it also means that they might try to influence you again or that someone responsible for the leak may approach you. Now that reality is setting in, they may be having second thoughts. Either way, some sort of

reveal is coming, and my guess is that you will be at the center of it. It would be helpful if you were actively involved in solving this problem.”

“O-okay,” Jason said hesitantly. “What exactly do you want me to do?”

“I’m going to be throwing an event this Saturday at our headquarters building. We hold this party every year to wine and dine potential investors and business partners. It’s also an excuse to showcase our products. I’d like you to attend.”

“How will that help?” Jason asked in confusion.

“I will be inviting all of the staff that worked on the AI controller software,” George replied simply. “As well as Gloria and her staff. She may refuse, of course. However, many industry leaders and politicians usually attend. I doubt she’ll turn down the opportunity to curry favor and attempt to poison the well with my colleagues.”

“So, you plan to use me as bait?” Jason said aloud before he could stop himself. He had used this strategy often enough with Frank – he just wasn’t used to being the bait.

“As I said, you catch on quickly,” George said with a tilt of his head. “Yes, the goal would be to see who approaches you and what they say. I suspect that the technical details will take the committee a few more days before another witness is called. I can also have Francis deliberately delay the proceedings. In the meantime, this will give us an opportunity to conduct some information gathering.”

The CEO abruptly stopped drumming his fingers against the leather, sitting still as he watched Jason. “So, what do you say? Will you help me?”

How had things become so complicated? Jason wished he could say no – that he could somehow rewind the clock by a month or two and start over. He could have never ordered a copy of AO. He could have paid attention in the cafeteria at Richmond. A small change to a dozen little events could have changed his trajectory. Yet real life didn’t let him save and reload. He only had one play through – and this was it.

He raised his eyes to meet George’s gaze. “I would be happy to attend.”

Chapter 26 - Murky

Jason stood in the center of the first challenge room. Bones and debris were scattered around him, evidence of the waves of undead that had crashed against him in an endless rhythm. His armor had also seen better days. The ivory plates along his arms and shoulders were cracked or missing entirely and the underlying leather needed to be repaired. Jason just couldn't work up the willpower to visit the market right now.

Almost instinctively, Jason refilled his store of bones and re-summoned his *Bone Armor*, the crumbling surface solidifying and new plates emerging from his skin. He had been practicing using the plates – which had their own health pool – to deflect blows. By accepting a hit while taking minimal damage, he could usually lure his opponent into overextending, which put him in a better position to counterattack. The results had been promising. He saved stamina by not needing to dodge and it allowed him to take out an enemy quickly.

He was improving, albeit slowly.

A popping sound echoed through the room, and Jason turned to see a receding flash of multi-colored energy. Riley now stood in the room, her eyes searching as she tried to get her bearings. As she saw Jason staring at her, she looked away.

"Hi," Riley said.

"Hello," Jason replied tersely as he continued to inspect his equipment, eyeing her in his peripheral vision.

The pair hadn't spoken much since they had defeated the first challenge. If anything, they were like two evil ships passing in the night. Riley tended to practice and train when Jason was at the hearing and then she was usually unavailable when he returned. As a result, they hadn't managed to try the new challenge yet.

"Did you do this?" Riley asked, surveying the room and the numerous piles of scattered bones skeptically.

"This was a few attempts," Jason replied noncommittally. "The new spell from the next room helps. I can last for about seven minutes consistently now." That was an understatement. Despite its crazy mana cost, *Soul Slash* was powerful enough to destroy several skeletons at once. If anything, Jason had been forcing himself *not* to use the ability in order to practice.

Riley's eyes widened in surprise. "You've already looked at the new room?" Her gaze shifted to the ominous bone doorway on the

other end of the room, the door having slid open again when Jason finished the challenge.

“A while ago,” Jason said, trying and failing to keep the irritation from his voice. “I’ve almost hit intermediate with *Soul Slash* already. You would know this if you showed up more often,” he muttered under his breath.

Riley looked taken aback by his comment. “I’ve been busy. There’s stuff going on in my life too, you know.”

Jason bit back his angry reply. It wouldn’t help to accuse her of prioritizing her new boyfriend over him. Wouldn’t he do the same thing? Besides, the bottom line was that he needed her help – regardless of his personal feelings. So he simply looked away.

“I know, but we need to focus on moving forward,” he said, trying to maintain a lighter, less-accusatory tone. The last thing he needed to do right now was start a fight. “We only have so much time until we reach Thorn’s deadline. Are you ready to try the next challenge?”

Riley stared at him for a second, as though unsure how to respond. “Sure, let’s do it,” she abruptly answered, and she immediately headed toward the bone doorway leading into the next room. With her back to him, Jason missed the look of frustration on Riley’s face.

A few seconds later, the pair stood in the new room. An unnatural darkness hung in the air like a heavy blanket, impeding their *Night Vision* and making it impossible to make out the size and shape of the room. The lonely sapphire flames of a single torch illuminated a familiar column – a milky orb affixed to the top. Jason pressed his palm to the sphere and waited for Rex to appear.

His former general soon obliged him, wispy tendrils drifting out of the orb. In the next instant, Rex’s shadowy clone stood before them. The skeleton glanced around in confusion for a moment before his eyes rested on Jason and Riley.

“It’s strange,” Rex commented, looking distracted. “In some ways, it feels like I was just here, but it also feels like an eternity has passed. How long has it been since you summoned me?”

“Only a day or so in our world,” Jason replied, a look of concern on his face as he watched Rex. “Maybe a couple of days here. So not very long.”

The skeleton cocked his head as though listening to something. Then he turned to look at Jason with sad eyes. “But long enough for things to have worsened in the Twilight Throne. We don’t have much time left, do we?”

Riley looked at Jason questioningly. He could still recall the way the injured undead had stared at him – their eyes angry and

demanding. They blamed him for what had happened to them. – and maybe they were right. “I’ll explain later,” he said to Riley before turning back to Rex. “But you’re right. We don’t have much time.”

Rex seemed to shake himself out of his stupor, regaining some of his usual enthusiasm and clapping his hands together – although they simply passed through one another. “Well, then let’s get to work, shall we? This next challenge will be even more difficult than the first, although the goal is rather simple. You need to slay all of the enemies in the room.”

“That doesn’t sound too bad,” Riley murmured.

Jason tended to agree. It seemed like an improvement over surviving an endless legion of undead for some unknown amount of time.

“You would think that, wouldn’t you?” Rex said dryly. “But then you would also be wrong. This room has a few... let us call them *quirks*.”

“In that case, can you offer a few hints,” Jason prompted the skeletal man. “We’re sort of running against the clock right now.”

“I wish I could,” Rex agreed, grinning broadly. “But my hands are tied!” Jason didn’t think he seemed too remorseful. “I’m supposed to give you another cryptic riddle about the lesson for this room. But I’ll at least spare you the headache. The goal here is *finesse*.”

“What does that mean?” Riley asked in a confused voice.

“It would probably be easier to show you...” Rex said, trailing off as he waved his hand.

Suddenly, the lone torch flickered out, and the entire room plunged into complete darkness. Jason was now certain that his original guess had been right. The darkness couldn’t be natural. He could barely make out the outline of his hand in front of his face from only a few inches away. Anything farther than that was impossible to see.

Before he and Riley had a chance to coordinate, the eerie, whispered voices spoke up.

Challenge 2: A Trial of Darkness has been initiated.

Prepare yourselves, challengers.

There was no sound of rattling bone this time. Instead, a heavy, almost oppressive silence, hung in the room. Between the lack of

sound and the darkness, Jason felt claustrophobic – like he was standing in his own sound-proofed coffin.

“Jason?” Riley asked hesitantly.

“I’m here,” he said. He had moved to a position where his hand was touching the rough stone wall. “Come to the sound of my voice.”

He felt a hand grope at his shoulder in the darkness. “How are we going to do this?” Riley asked, once she was closer. She kept her voice low. They didn’t know what was lurking in the shadows.

“I have no idea,” he replied, trying to peer into the darkness and keeping his staff raised and ready. It seemed almost impossible to fight without being able to see. Maybe when Rex said “finesse” what he meant was that they needed to avoid running into each other or tripping over their own feet? Maybe this was some sort of introspective challenge, like the enemy was themselves and they needed to face their own demons – not unlike the time he had bashed in his vice principal’s head with a rock. He was *really* hoping that was the case.

Jason suddenly froze as he heard a faint whispering sound – like the swish of a broom over stone. Yet as the seconds passed, the sound didn’t repeat. He almost wondered if he had imagined it. Concentrating, he tried to still his breathing as much as possible, and he strained with his ears, trying to catch any sound that might give a hint of an attack.

He heard the faint swish again, but this time he didn’t have the opportunity to react. Something slammed into his shoulder with impressive force, his back crashing against the stone wall. As fast as the thing struck, it was gone. Pain radiated out from Jason’s arm, and he could tell that the *Bone Armor* along his arm had been destroyed. Meanwhile, a red notification flashed in his peripheral vision.

-1,069 Damage

Limb Damage: reaction speed reduced by 15%.

Damn it! Whatever that was, it hits like a truck!

“Are you alright?” Riley asked from nearby.

Before he could reply, he heard another swish, followed closely by Riley’s grunt of pain. Jason saw Riley’s health dip in the group interface. Those two tentative strikes weren’t the last. It was almost as though the initial attacks had been meant to test them because the next few blows came hard and fast, leaving the pair little time to coordinate or regroup.

They were knocked about and smashed into walls. It wasn’t just the damage caused by each attack, but also the stunning effect of

slamming against the stone walls or floor, that kept them off balance. From the grunts of pain and the crashing sound each time the creatures struck, Jason could tell that they were driving Riley farther away from him – likely trying to split them up. However, there wasn't much he could do about it. The blows came fast and furious, each one targeting a different limb.

Within only moments, Jason's health was waning, and multiple limbs were fractured – slowing his movements even further. Not that he had managed to hit anything anyway. Even through the cloud of pain, he could tell that whatever lingered in the darkness was slowly and methodically hunting them. First, it was splitting them up, and then it was crippling them to make it more difficult to fight back.

Jason's tired mind clung to that last idea. Whatever this was, it didn't want them to fight back. Which implied that they *could*. But how? How the hell could they fight something they couldn't see or hear?

He heard another faint swish and flinched involuntarily. A blow rocketed into his left shoulder again, and the bone was knocked out of the socket with a sickening pop. Even with the dampened pain feedback in-game, it felt like his shoulder was on fire, and Jason let out a hissing breath, struggling to focus.

"It's the sound," he heard Riley grunt from nearby, her voice filled with pain and her breath coming in ragged gasps. "They make a sound just before they strike."

Jason knew she was right, although he didn't know how he could use that information. He held his staff in his less-injured arm, even that limb radiating with pain. It was a struggle just to keep his grip on the weapon. Even if he heard the sound, he'd only have a one or two-second window before the creature attacked. And even then, he wouldn't be able to see what he was swinging at. He would just have to flail blindly.

On the other hand, he didn't exactly have anything to lose.

Jason forced his broken body to stand as still as possible, yet he couldn't stop his legs and arms from shaking from pain and fatigue. Instead, he decided to reposition, and sunk to his knees, choking up on his staff to compensate for the loss of height. He forced his lungs to slow their breathing and willed his frantic heartbeat to slow. The sound was faint. He couldn't afford any distractions. He closed his eyes. They were useless anyway.

All his attention was focused on his hearing. He just needed to pick up the faint, telltale sound of a brush stroke. He wouldn't have time to think about acting, only to react. The world seemed to slow around him, his perspective of time warping in the bottomless darkness.

Then he heard it.

Swish.

Jason moved immediately, lashing forward with the staff wildly while channeling his *Soul Slash*. His staff raced forward, and the spectral blade cut at the darkness hungrily. It wasn't clear if he had struck anything. He felt no resistance as the weapon passed through the air, but the anticipated blow never came.

"I-I think I might have hit one," Jason said aloud.

As soon as he spoke and relaxed his guard slightly, another blow slammed into his chest, throwing him backward and into the wall. His head struck the stone with a sharp crack, and suddenly he could see small lights superimposed over the darkness. Someone was shouting from nearby, but he couldn't make out their words. Then there was silence again – deafening silence – and his UI flashed, Riley's icon graying out.

Riley is dead, he thought, struggling to focus.

He clawed his way back to his knees. It took most of his considerable willpower to remain upright and to keep his staff raised. However, he knew he had no chance. He was crippled, he couldn't walk, and he had one more blow left in him. Yet, he refused to back down. He struggled to control his breathing, listening intently for the sound.

Swish.

Blinding pain filled his body as this blow cracked his ribcage, driving the bone fragments into his lungs. He managed a single wracking wet cough – red notifications flashing in his peripheral vision – before slumping to the floor.

Suddenly, the pain was gone. With the ever-present darkness in the room, the merciful absence of pain was the only way he was able to tell that his body had finally failed him. A taunting blue notification appeared in the air – confirming what he already knew.

System Message

You have died.

Thanks for playing Awaken Online!

“What the hell was that?” Jason heard someone shouting as he came to. He stumbled, off balance as he found himself suddenly standing again. The world spun around him and he leaned heavily against a nearby wall as he tried to catch his bearings.

He was standing once more near the entrance to the second challenge room. Or maybe he had never really moved. It had been difficult to tell his location in the room during the trial. The light from the lone torch was nearly blinding after what had felt like an eternity spent in total darkness, and he covered his eyes with a hand while his vision adjusted.

As Jason began to recover, he could see Riley standing nearby, stabbing an accusing finger at Rex. “That was bullshit! How are we supposed to fight something we can’t see? What possible lesson could we learn from this?”

Rex was simply staring at the girl impassively, unperturbed by her tirade. As he saw Jason appear, he glanced over. “Ahh, now that you are both back, we can see how you did!”

Riley huffed in irritation at being ignored, and, for a brief moment, Jason thought she might try to attack their former general – although her weapons would do little good against his misty form.

Challenge 2: A Trial of Darkness failed.

Total Time: 2 minutes and 17 seconds.

Riley Kills: 0

Jason Kills: 0

“See? We didn’t kill anything!” Riley said, gesturing at Rex.

“Technically, you did manage to at least *hit* something. Once,” he replied with a deadpan expression. “That was pretty impressive.”

Riley looked like she was about to explode at that comment, but Jason interjected. “That’s... nice, I guess? She does have a point, though. How are we supposed to fight those things – whatever they are? We can’t even see what we’re fighting.”

“Ahh, is it necessary to see your target to hit them?” Rex answered in a dry tone. “And here I was thinking your weapons work just fine even with your eyes closed. I must have been using them wrong when I was alive.”

“No,” Jason replied through gritted teeth. “It is certainly possible to hit our opponents without seeing them. Although, the sight

part does tend to help with *accuracy*.”

“Huh, if only there were a way to compensate for that,” Rex said, rubbing at his skeletal chin.

Riley massaged at her temple. “Okay. Sure. We’re all ears. How are we supposed to hit whatever those things are while blind?”

“Pretty simple. Swing?” Rex retorted. He seemed to be enjoying their frustration.

At that point, Jason’s and Riley’s patience finally snapped and they started shouting at the skeleton. Being brutally beaten and killed didn’t help keep a person calm and level-headed.

After they began to wind down, Rex held up a staying hand, unperturbed by their outburst. “Look. I told you this trial is about finesse. You started to learn some of the relevant techniques in the first challenge – economy of movement, precision strikes, and learning when to trade hits. This is all a product of skilled combat.”

He gestured with a wispy hand at the darkness behind him. “But even with this training, you are limited by your senses. You rely on your sight and can only respond to what is directly in front of you. What about the ambush from behind? What about the arrow barreling toward your head in the heat of battle? In the middle of the fray, it is those unseen blows that tend to be the deadliest – not the swordsman running at you from the front.”

“Do you reasonably expect us to be able to dodge arrows?” Riley demanded. “I think this might not be entirely realistic.”

“No, absolutely not,” Rex replied, looking mildly offended. He leaned forward toward Riley, his dark eyes flashing. “I expect you to be able to dodge or deflect arrows while *also* simultaneously fighting multiple opponents.” He glanced at Jason. “At least one of you have already seen that this is possible.”

Jason was about to tell Rex this was futile but stopped himself. He did remember his fight with Thorn. Looking back on it, the man had seemed to anticipate attacks from behind him and Jason’s curses had barely disrupted the flow of combat. In fact, he had used Jason’s attacks against him while continuing to fight. And then there was the moment where he had struck at Frank, dust obscuring the battlefield and his lone eye closed. The only reason Thorn had missed was due to Frank’s hasty, instinctive dodge.

“Thorn was able to do what Rex is describing,” Jason said somberly, deflating Riley’s anger. “And that’s who we’re trying to beat. We should assume that every member of the Order is capable of the same feat.”

Riley took a deep, resigned breath. “Fine. I guess we need to become some sort of ninja now. I get it. How do we train for this then? Even if we tried again right now, I’m not sure what I would do

differently – or what I could do.”

Rex looked back and forth between the pair. “I’ve already told you the answer – or at least implied it. You need to learn to use your other senses. Unfortunately, this isn’t something that can be improved in a sparring ring or the training room. The only way to train is to run this challenge until you can do it with your eyes closed – literally.”

Jason shook his head. Even having seen what Thorn and his compatriots were capable of and even with more training, this challenge seemed impossible. He also saw skepticism painted on Riley’s face as she eyed the darkness hovering on the other end of the room.

“Don’t believe me, huh?” Rex asked, crossing his spectral arms. “Of course, you don’t! How many times do I have to remind you that I have the memories of centuries of the Kin? How about you check your notifications before you start yelling at me about how this is impossible.”

Jason’s brow furrowed in confusion and he saw that Riley was similarly taken aback. Her hand swiped at the air, presumably bringing up her system notifications. Jason did the same. Blue notices soon appeared in his vision.

New Passive Skill: Listening

You have learned how to use your ears, congratulations! Intensive training in the use of your senses, such as hearing, can greatly enhance your sensitivity. Masters of this skill have been said to be able to hear a pin drop from yards away. Plus, your girlfriend will likely find you much more attentive! These are just a few of the many perks of being able to use your fleshy cartilage radars.

Skill Level: Beginner Level 1

Effect: 5% enhanced hearing.

x2 Skill Rank Up: Toughness

Skill Level: Intermediate Level 5

Effect 1: -8% damage and pain.

Effect 2: Reduced fatigue duration by 14%.

Jason sighed as he reviewed the new notification. He didn’t appreciate the jab about listening to his girlfriend – which hit a little too close to home with Riley standing right there, but at least this offered a chance to beat the challenge. Improving his hearing would help, but it still didn’t seem like nearly enough. Even if he could learn to anticipate and dodge the unseen creatures’ attacks, how would they

fight back?

“Okay,” Jason said, swiping away his notifications. “We literally need to learn how to beat this challenge with our eyes closed. I get it. What now?”

Rex’s jaw clacked as he laughed. “Weren’t you *listening*, boy? You two get to run it again. And again. And again...”

Jason shared a look with Riley. Despite the tension between them, they were both thinking the same thing. Rex was a sadist. And this challenge was going to be a pain in the ass.

“Speaking of which, you both look rested now. It must be time for round two!” Rex added. With that, he waved his hand, and the lone torch sputtered out. A familiar sound soon whispered through the now-darkened room.

Swish.

Chapter 27 - Surplus

A few hours later, Jason found himself standing at the entrance to the dark keep and facing the market. As Pint dropped him off outside, Jason leaned back against the massive wooden gates with a tired sigh. He and Riley had attempted the second challenge over a dozen times. They hadn't seemed to improve at all – at least as far as Jason could tell.

He felt like he already had a sense of what the second challenge was intended to teach. His *Soul Slash* had such a high mana cost that it wasn't possible to channel it continuously. In addition to improving his senses and precision, the challenge was probably trying to teach him to use *Soul Slash* quickly and sparingly. Not that this helped him at all.

Each successive attempt had been the same as the last. The invisible creatures would strike with little warning, slowly crippling them until they mercifully ended their lives. Despite Rex's assurances that they had hit the creatures a handful of times, there was never any evidence of that after the challenge ended. Besides learning to flinch at the sound of a broom, he wasn't sure what he had really gained from the experience. Their efforts felt futile, and Riley had quickly logged off after the last attempt – giving him a curt goodbye.

With a weary swipe of his hand, Jason brought up his notifications.

x7 Skill Rank Up: Listening

Skill Level: Beginner Level 8

Effect: 12% enhanced hearing.

x3 Skill Rank Up: Perception

Skill Level: Beginner Level 9

Effect: 11% increased chance to discover traps and unnoticed details.

x2 Skill Rank Up: Toughness

Skill Level: Intermediate Level 7

Effect 1: -9% damage and pain.

Effect 2: Reduced fatigue duration by 16%.

At least, this is a great way to train Toughness, Jason thought to

himself. He only had to get beaten to death repeatedly in order to progress this quickly. Maybe his new *Listening* skill would provide a helpful bonus once he hit intermediate.

He sure hoped so.

Jason pushed himself away from the wall. There was no sense dwelling on the challenge right now. He turned his attention back to the market. He needed to check on his bids and see how they had progressed while he had been busy with other things.

Jason arrived at the pillar in the center of the market a few minutes later. The auctioneer saw him approaching and quickly cowered behind a nearby booth – trying his best to stay out of sight. Clearly, Jason had made an impression during his last visit. Without any further ado, he placed his palm on the column, and the auction house interface appeared in the air in front of him.

Jason's mouth dropped open as he surveyed the results.

His entire 1,000 gold budget was gone in just a few in-game days. Not only that, but he had purchased practically every ingredient on the market. The lists were now barren, and the few remaining ingredients were selling for crazy prices – well above his automatic bid settings.

Jason quickly flipped over to the lists for the potions, holding his breath as the menu loaded. With growing excitement, he found that those lists were nearly empty as well. There were only a handful of stacks up for sale, and the price for even the lesser health potions had jumped to 5 gold – although he failed to see how new players could afford that price.

“Damn, it worked,” he murmured to himself. He could practically see green as he visualized flooding the market with his new potions at a healthy mark-up.

He glanced up quickly, his gaze focusing on the auctioneer and a wide grin curling his lips. “I’m going to need you to deliver a few things.”

The auctioneer went to reach into the bag he clutched in his arms, but Jason stopped him with a gesture. “No, not here. Deliver my purchases to Jerry at his inn. Tell him to get them to Cecil. He’ll know what to do.”

“We aren’t allowed to leave our post. We don’t normally deliver...”

“I’m not asking,” Jason said forcefully. “You’re in *my* city, so my orders are all you should care about right now. Now go!” As he said this last part, he gestured to the southern road leading out of the market. The man only spent another second wringing his hands in indecision. Finally, he must have decided that he’d be better off shirking his duties than to ignore Jason’s order. He shot off at a sprint

and quickly disappeared.

Jason watched the auctioneer's form as he fled. He needed to be discreet. The last thing he wanted to do was alert someone to how he had manipulated the market or inadvertently lead Thorn and his crew to The Grove. That cave complex and the materials that the auctioneer was carrying were now worth a not-so-small fortune to him.

There was still one more stop he needed to make. They needed to strike while the iron was hot. It was time to talk to Eliza.

* * *

As Jason entered The Grove for the second time, he was floored by how much the cavern had changed. A full contingent of the Kin still guarded the massive steel door, and hundreds of glowing globes circled the ceiling, creating artificial sunlight that shone down harshly on the cavern floor. However, where there had only been rows of barren dirt fields, there was now lush green vegetation covering nearly every inch of the cave.

Jason stepped through the rows, eyeing the plants curiously. Many looked similar to their earth-born cousins, with plain green leaves and regular stalks. However, the differences increased as he kept walking. He saw flowers in a rainbow of hues – a *literal* rainbow of colors on each petal. Others looked like twisted and gnarled creations that would be more at home on an alien planet than inside of AO.

As he inspected one bush, Jason sensed movement in his peripheral vision, and he stepped to the side quickly – his combat reflexes taking over. A thorn-covered vine snapped at the air where he had been standing only a moment before, and Jason looked behind him in shock. A bush rested there placidly, not giving any indication that it had just moved or tried to strike him.

“What the hell is this thing?” Jason asked aloud. He tried to inspect the plant, but the prompt came back empty. Apparently, he lacked the knowledge or skills to identify the bush.

“It’s a Lashtail,” a timid voice spoke from behind him. He turned to find Eliza approaching, a basket tucked under her arm containing seeds and gardening tools. “They can be territorial, and they suck up a lot of water. The tendrils can help... um, *compensate* for the lack of moisture.”

It took Jason a second to put two and two together. “You mean it kills animals that walk past and drains their blood, don’t you?” He

gave the plant another considering look.

Eliza nodded, grimacing slightly. "But their thorns are fantastic in a variety of enhancement potions," she offered.

"Ha. Okay, note to self – be careful around the plants," Jason said with a small smile. "By the way, you've done an incredible job here. I can't believe how fast you managed to get these plants to grow."

Eliza blushed and looked down at her basket instead of meeting Jason's gaze. "I enjoy it," she said quietly. "Plus, it's been days since the Hippie has pestered me. You don't know how much I've wanted to just focus on gardening."

Jason could recall the irritating water god's antics with painful clarity. "I can probably guess," he said with a grin. "Anyway, I was actually looking for you."

"What? Why?" Eliza asked, looking a little nervous.

"Nothing bad at all," Jason assured the timid girl. "Actually, the opposite. I've ordered the ingredients you asked for, plus a few extra things. Here, let me email you the list." He tapped at his UI and sent the list he had compiled to Eliza.

Her own hands swiped at the air in front of her, and he saw her eyes darting back and forth as she read through his email. Then he saw her mouth form a small "O" of shock. She glanced at him in surprise. "This is a lot more than I asked for."

Jason shrugged, an excited grin on his face. "I had an idea when I visited the auction house. I ended up basically buying everything on the market to drive up the price of the health potions. Now we just need to manufacture the potions as quickly as possible."

Eliza didn't seem as excited as Jason as she continued reading through the list. She shook her head. "This is going to take weeks..." she murmured.

"Weeks?" Jason asked in confusion. "I thought Cecil said he'd already set up your laboratory – or at least he was in the process of setting it up."

"That's only part of the problem," Eliza replied cautiously. "Although, it would probably be easier to show you." With this last statement, she gestured at the far end of the cavern.

A few minutes later, the pair had navigated the rows of growing plants and found themselves in a tributary cave that had been connected to the main cavern by a small passage. This new enclosure was a rough square about fifty feet wide. In one corner, a set of tables and some exotic-looking alchemy equipment had been set up. The lab looked awkward in the large room, only occupying a fraction of the space.

"I-is this it?" Jason asked without thinking. He immediately

saw Eliza's face fall. "I'm sorry," he amended quickly. "I was just expecting a larger laboratory."

"Cecil was too," Eliza said quietly, gesturing at the open space. "That's why he had the little mole creatures dig out this big cave. But even if we filled the rest of the space with tables and equipment, that wouldn't exactly help."

"I guess I'm confused," Jason said, eyeing the mage and a heavy weight beginning to settle in his stomach. "So, it's not a problem with being able to set up a larger lab?"

"Not really. The problem is the number of alchemists," she explained. Eliza pointed to herself. "We only have one – me, that is. And I'm only Intermediate level 6 right now."

"Why is your skill level important? Is it because that limits how many potions you can create at once or something?" Jason asked.

Eliza cocked her head, looking at him curiously. "Ahh, you probably haven't spent much time crafting. Maybe I should start over."

She took a deep breath. "As you're probably aware, the crafting in this game is a bit more complicated than other MMOs. It doesn't involve a simple button press or manually grinding through potions to level. Instead, it takes considerable training and practice to advance. In many ways, I am literally brewing the potions using something akin to modern chemistry. The same is probably the case for other crafters like blacksmiths and enchanters."

Jason just stared at her for a moment. "Wait, what? You actually have to learn how to brew the potions?"

He was floored, his thoughts immediately returning to his conversation with Alfred. The AI hadn't been lying about the complexity of this game world. If it weren't for the enhanced learning speed in-game, some of these activities would be incredibly difficult for the regular player to pick up. He also wondered if this meant that there would be a wide divide between crafters. Two Alchemists or Blacksmiths might not be equally competent or equally good at creating the same goods.

"Basically, yes," Eliza said with a nod. "The game does simplify the process a little. I gain a chance to gather more ingredients and prepare more potions – and more concentrated potions – as I level. There is some randomness to the process. But for the most part, it's pretty realistic."

"Okay, so where's our bottleneck in production?"

Eliza adjusted her glasses, glancing at Jason briefly. "The problem is that there is only one of me and the production process takes time. I can't just press a button and wait ten seconds."

"Okay," Jason murmured aloud, catching on to the problem.

There was just a hard limit to how quickly Eliza could produce potions by herself, and he had just purchased way more ingredients than she could use in a short period of time. Unfortunately, Jason also needed a lot of potions within a very short window if he was going to capitalize on the price inflation. Eventually, the market would level out as other Herbalists and Alchemists started collecting ingredients and brewing potions to take advantage of the high prices.

“This question seems obvious, but couldn’t we just get some people to help you?” he offered. He could probably order some of the undead to assist her.

“There aren’t really any alchemists at Cecil’s school,” Eliza replied, glancing down at her hands. “Probably because this is normally a terrible climate for gathering ingredients.” She sighed, picking at one of the vials on a nearby table. “We also can’t really use inexperienced people. I can only have a certain number of apprentices helping me based on my level in *Alchemy*. If anyone else tries to assist, it will automatically ruin the potion. At Intermediate, I can only have one apprentice.”

Jason swallowed hard, trying to fight back the bile at the back of his throat as he considered how much money he may have just lost. “I can see the idea there. Otherwise, a guild could just have a single advanced crafter and then have their inexperienced players help that person. I guess it was a way to prevent abusing the mechanics.”

“I suppose so,” Eliza agreed.

Damn it, Alfred, Jason thought.

The pair lapsed into silence, staring at the small laboratory. This put a huge kink in Jason’s plans, and he could already visualize his money swirling down a massive drain. He was sitting on a huge surplus of ingredients that would take them weeks to turn into potions. He could probably resell the potions he had purchased off the market at a healthy mark-up, but that would only cover a small fraction of the total cost of building the cave and buying the ingredients.

“Is there any other way to increase your production?” Jason asked, the question feeling futile. “Anything at all. The faster we can produce potions, the more of our funds we can recoup while the price of health potions is still high.”

Eliza chewed on her lip. “There might be a few things. I can take on at least one apprentice – which will help. I can also try to streamline my process. Alma had complicated alchemy kits that could handle most of the brewing process for her and I took a bunch of notes on the designs. Apparently, automating the process a little doesn’t count as having an apprentice. It would probably take Cecil a while to help me reproduce the equipment, though.”

She glanced at Jason, her expression downcast. "Other than that, I'm not sure. I-I'm sorry."

Jason suddenly realized that he was glaring at the laboratory equipment and Eliza was looking at him like he had just kicked her dog – or magical black sheep. "I'm sorry, this isn't your fault at all," Jason reassured her. "This is on me for jumping the gun and buying way more than we needed. I should have talked to you first."

He sighed, trying not to let Eliza see his frustration. "I guess try to get together with Cecil and see what you two can come up with quickly. He should also be able to find you an apprentice. In the meantime, I'll see if I can think of something to help. I don't want to pressure you, but the faster we can produce potions in the short-term, the better."

"Okay," Eliza said cautiously, turning back to her lab. She started to pull ingredients from her basket and nodded. "I'll try my best."

"I'm sure you will," Jason agreed. "Thank you for all of your help with this."

With that, he took his leave, navigating his way back through the massive cavern filled with now-useless vegetation. He mentally kicked himself as he walked. He had probably just lost a ton of money and all because he had been moving much too quickly and hadn't been thinking. Yet a small part of him felt like there had to be a way to fix this and salvage what he'd done. It was an elusive nagging feeling at the edge of his mind. Or maybe it was just his stupid pride refusing to admit that he'd fucked up. Badly.

He sighed again. Either way, there was nowhere to go but forward.

Chapter 28 - Bleak

Frank and Vera walked through the remains of a ruined village. A door to a nearby house hung limply from its hinges, having been partially ripped from the frame. Deep claw marks were carved in the wooden surface. Inside, Frank was sure he would find blood staining the floorboards – the only remaining evidence that a family had once lived there. He wished this was the only home that bore evidence of an attack, but that wasn't the case. The rest of the village wasn't in much better condition.

Nearby, undead soldiers robed in the armaments of the Twilight Throne searched house to house in packs of three or four. They couldn't be certain that the native undead had fully abandoned the small town. Frank grimaced as he saw the troops exit each house empty-handed, their expressions grim as they proceeded to the next residence. He knew that undead scouts were also scouring the surrounding forest.

"How many survivors have we found?" Frank asked in a muted voice.

"About two dozen," Vera answered as her bleached-white eyes took in the devastation dispassionately. "Some of the townsfolk holed themselves up in a wine cellar during the attack. Quick thinking in my opinion. I'm pretty sure that's the only thing that saved them."

A grim grin tugged at her pale lips. "They were armed with rusty swords, and one woman actually tried to swing a skillet at our troops. It's a wonder they fended off the attack."

"And the search is almost complete?" Frank asked, already knowing the answer.

Vera let out a soft huff at Frank's inane question, but she was also a veteran soldier and she kept her expression respectful. She understood that mundane routine helped a person process the sort of violence that had struck this village. "Nearly. Maybe another thirty minutes and we'll have scoured every inch of this town."

They continued their trek into the town's former square, the remains of merchant stands, and wagons sitting abandoned. Pools of congealed and dried blood littered almost every surface, the muted coppery scent noticeable despite the game's dampened sense of smell. There was a decided lack of bodies, despite the carnage. With the amount of blood and the evidence of fighting, there should be dead men and women littering the streets. Yet they had only found blood.

"I guess we can assume that the native undead are responsible

for this,” Frank murmured.

“That’s a safe bet,” Vera answered with a nod. “That would explain the missing corpses. I expect that they gathered the bodies and brought them back to their nest.”

“They are growing bolder,” Frank added, glancing at Vera out of the corner of his eye. “This is what? The third town we’ve found in this state?” This macabre ritual hadn’t become any easier with practice.

“Yes,” Vera answered bluntly. “But at least there were more survivors this time.”

Frank grimaced. Some of the other towns had nearly been wiped off the map by the native undead. The creatures were growing stronger and more aggressive. They also didn’t fear casualties – simply recovering the loose bones of their fellows and dragging them back to their corrupted nests. This pattern of behavior was making Frank nervous – and not only because of the loss of potential recruits for the Twilight Throne.

No, he was worried about how strong the undead might become and what they might have to face in the future. As Vera had explained before, the nests spawned creatures based on the type of remains that were scavenged, allowing the native undead to mutate over time. He could only imagine what they might create with their growing collection of human corpses. The thought made him shudder.

“Have we found the nest yet?” Frank asked.

“Our scouts have come up short. I’d say the trail is cold, but the real problem is that the native undead headed off in a dozen different directions. It would take us a few days to track down the nest – at least,” Vera explained. Then she hesitated for a moment, her hand resting on the hilt of the sword at her waist. “Assuming there is only one nest, of course.”

Frank winced. She raised a fair point. “I guess the question then is whether to track down these creatures or head to the next village,” he said, his gaze lingering on the Kin that wound through the streets and inspected each building.

“There’s no guarantee we’ll make it in time,” she said. “For all we know, those people are already dead.”

“I know,” Frank replied. “And I know that we can’t risk sending scouts, not with how dangerous traversing the forest has become.” He glanced at Vera. “On the other hand, will destroying one more nest – or several – stop these attacks? We don’t even know what’s causing the undead to mutate and grow this quickly.”

Vera just grunted in reply, but he could see the unspoken counterargument in her eyes. Destroying the nests would still slow down whatever had thrown the surrounding ecosystem out of whack.

Yet that might cost them days in-game. That meant that more towns might meet a similar fate. So far, they had only managed to convert two villages before they were attacked, and they were only about halfway done.

The pair lapsed into a solemn silence as they continued their inspection of the village. They soon came across a group of soldiers standing near the remaining human survivors at the edge of the town's former market. The townsfolk huddled together, their clothing ripped and bloodstained and more than one person sporting a vicious injury. As they saw Frank, they stared with vacant, pain-filled eyes – pleading with him but too exhausted to form words. They probably hadn't slept in days, huddled together in that wine cellar.

Frank knew he should go over to them and offer some sort of support. Or perhaps explain what would happen next – as soon as he messaged Jason. Yet he couldn't force himself to do it. He'd already had that conversation several times now, and it hadn't gotten any easier. He kept trying to tell himself that they weren't real. In other games, that would have been enough. But here, inside AO, it was different.

Vera rested a hand on his shoulder. "I'll handle it," she offered.

He glanced at her in surprise. The undead woman was gruff and no-nonsense. She never seemed to let the violence and hardship affect her. Perhaps those weaker emotions had been beaten out of her in whatever former life she had led before becoming part of the Kin. However, occasionally, she showed that there was still some trace of compassion left in her.

"Thank you," Frank murmured. "I'll go contact Jason."

"And then?" He knew what she was really asking.

Frank closed his eyes, running a hand through his hair. When he opened them again, the survivors were still there, bloodied and haggard. "Then we head to the next village," he said finally. "Maybe we can't save everyone. Maybe most of them are already dead. We'll just have to try to save as many as we can."

Chapter 29 - Relaxed

Jason pulled off his VR helmet with a sigh, his hair matted against his forehead by sweat and the interior foam. The air felt cool on his scalp. He lay unmoving in bed, staring up at the ceiling of his apartment. A star-scape was currently being displayed across the surface, faint lines tracing the constellations as Jason's gaze panned across the digital mural. Without looking at a clock, the presence of the stars meant it must be late in the real world. The screen always changed to this landscape at night.

He felt exhausted. He had spent the last few hours in-game assisting Frank with the formation of another Dark Spire and trying to think of some way to dig himself out of the hole he had created by over-purchasing ingredients for the health potions. Of course, this was ignoring the rest of his problems – which seemed to be mounting at an alarming rate.

More than anything else, he just wanted to pass out here and wait until morning. However, he knew he needed to force himself to get up and take care of his body. His bladder was already trying to tell him that it had been full for hours – warring for attention with his stomach as it gurgled loudly to remind him that he needed to eat.

He tapped at his Core to check the time. *Damn it. It's way too late to hit the cafeteria.*

With a groan, he pushed himself to a sitting position. On top of being mentally exhausted, his body ached as though he had just run a marathon. He rubbed absently at his chest and shoulders as he stood and stumbled into the bathroom, trying to massage out some of the soreness.

Standing in front of the mirror, Jason almost didn't recognize the person in front of him. His chest and arms were much more defined. He could only guess that Alfred had decided to up his body's physical training while he was logged in. Between that and the long periods of fasting, he had gained muscle and dropped fat, making him look more like a professional athlete than a full-time nerd who spent all day lying in bed. Maybe the AI was concerned about muscle atrophy or something.

For a moment, the image of the two dead teenagers flashed through Jason's mind. Or perhaps there was another reason Alfred had ratcheted up Jason's physical training in the real world. Although, he was too tired to dwell on that terrifying possibility right now.

Jason shrugged on a t-shirt and stepped into the kitchen,

feeling a little more alive after walking around for a bit. He could only guess that the movement helped process some of the lactic acid that had built up in his muscles. He spent a few minutes scouring the kitchen. It looked like Angie had managed to order some groceries – or maybe one of George’s assistants had realized they were out of food. Either way, he was soon sitting at the counter and working his way through his third bowl of cereal.

Jason heard the door to the apartment open and shut with a faint click and Angie soon popped into the kitchen. She looked surprised to see Jason sitting at the counter. “Wow, the dead have risen!” she said with mock enthusiasm. “Pun intended, by the way,” Angie added with a grin. She stopped to give him a quick hug before proceeding into the kitchen.

“That’s rich coming from you,” Jason replied with a grin. He tapped at his Core. “Do you know what time it is, old lady?”

Angie let out a snort of laughter. “Touché.”

“It feels like I haven’t seen you in weeks,” Jason added more soberly.

His aunt spared a glance at him as she stepped briskly around the kitchen. “From your perspective, I’m guessing it probably has been a few weeks. That time compression thing must mess with your sense of time. Either way, they’ve had me doing crazy hours at the lab.”

“It seems ridiculous that they make you work this late,” Jason said, shaking his head.

“Welcome to biotech!” Angie replied glibly. “Last minute is the only way we know.”

A few seconds later, his aunt slumped onto the stool beside him, a food-laden plate in front of her. “So, what’s been going on with you?” she asked tentatively, side-eyeing him. “I saw you on the news the other day at the courthouse.”

Jason let out a sigh of his own. “I’m honestly not sure where to start.”

“The beginning is usually a good place,” Angie answered with a small smile.

He rolled his eyes in response. “Sure. Let’s see,” he began, counting off on his fingers, “I’m having to attend a bunch of regulatory hearings since I’ll probably be a witness next week. Oh, and that hearing is getting national media attention, and my livelihood and our fancy new apartment probably hang in the balance.

“Inside AO, our city is being threatened by some sort of digital terrorist hellbent on stopping the gods from re-emerging. The native undead around the Twilight Throne have begun to evolve and mutate out of control and destroy many of the outlying villages, and I’m struggling to complete a set of impossible challenges created by an

ancient race of necromancers. Oh, and I just blew a ton of money trying to corner the market for health potions – which has backfired spectacularly, by the way.”

He looked at Angie meaningfully. “In short, things are just going *awesome*.”

“It sure sounds like it,” his aunt said with a grimace. Then she glanced at him with a raised eyebrow. “Although, I notice you didn’t mention a certain pretty blonde girl. What happened after we spoke last? You make a move?”

Jason quickly turned away from his aunt and shoveled some cereal into his mouth, trying to buy himself some time to think about how to answer that question. Maybe she would forget he was there if he held really still.

His tactic wasn’t lost on Angie. “That good, huh?”

He swallowed hard. “I have no idea what happened,” he admitted finally. “She seemed interested and... well, we almost kissed. But afterward it was awkward. She seemed like maybe she was upset or something? I tried to downplay it and explain that it wasn’t a big deal and then she got angry. Things have been pretty tense since then.”

“Well, shit,” his aunt replied, her eyes wide. “Although, I guess I could see why she might have been awkward when you brought it up. Not to nitpick, but you might have made the situation worse by telling her it wasn’t a big deal.”

Jason grimaced. Had he read that situation wrong? Then he shook his head. “Not that it matters now, I guess. I think she’s dating some other guy named Caleb now,” he added despondently.

After a long pause, Jason muttered, “Girls are confusing, and I have no idea what’s going on.”

This earned him a slap on the back from his aunt. “Ahh, then I guess you’re learning!”

Jason needed to change the topic. “Anyway, let’s get back to you. I could really use a distraction, right now. Are you guys almost finished with this new product line? Will you be able to ease up soon?”

It was his aunt’s turn to grimace. “We’re nearly at the finish line. We’re moving a new product through the final round of quality control. They’ve got a team of us double, triple, and quadruple-checking everything – from the reagents to documentation to machine calibrations. It feels stupid and redundant, but the company has a ton of money tied up in development, and they don’t want anything throwing a wrinkle into things.”

Jason’s brow furrowed in thought, the hint of an idea tugging at the edge of his mind. “Isn’t most of the actual manufacturing

process automated? You make it sound like you are making stuff by hand..."

"Sort of," his aunt said with a nod, taking a bite. "Back in the day, it used to be worse. Most product lines were originally developed and manufactured by hand until they were taken to market – and, even then, they tended to be mass produced in stages using human labor. That's putting aside the sterile lab conditions and equipment cost. That's probably part of why most drugs and tests are so expensive.

"We've streamlined a bit over the years. There are fewer of us sitting at a workbench with a pipette, but that just means there is an even larger mountain of paperwork and the machine calibration becomes even more important."

His aunt now had Jason's full attention. This was starting to sound like Eliza's potion project, and he was kicking himself for not thinking about his aunt's profession earlier. "And once you move the product to market? Can you automate manufacturing?"

Angie glanced at him as she took another bite. "Why the sudden interest? Thinking about giving up professional gaming to become a lab grunt?"

"Not quite," Jason replied, trying to dissemble. "I'm just curious."

"Hmph," she grunted skeptically around a mouthful of food. "In the past, the answer would have been no. Nowadays, though, a lot of the human labor has been removed. Most pharma factories are almost entirely automated. This was partly due to improvements in factory automation and AI. Even the smallest variations in reagent quality or in the manufacturing process can ruin a whole batch. Nowadays, most of that stuff is self-regulating and the scientists involved are just there to monitor things."

Jason was staring at his aunt, but his thoughts were a mile away. Eliza had mentioned creating a set of alchemy equipment that could automate portions of the production process – which got around the skill and apprentice restrictions. Was there a way he could take that a step further? An alchemy set was one thing, but could he create a full-fledged, automated factory? Assuming he could somehow create a factory, then Eliza might be able to administer the entire thing herself. That would solve his production problems nearly overnight. Putting aside little technical details like whether it was even possible or not.

But was it that unrealistic? Riley had told him stories about the mage city of Vaerwald and how the various mage guilds worked together to use their various types of mana to provide public utilities: running water, a transportation system, heating. The mages had

constructed a massive network of bronze pipes they used to move people around the city like a fantasy vacuum tube. She had explained that every guild contributed to the city's public facilities in some way.

Riley had also mentioned that there once used to be a dark-mana guild in the mage city, although she had the impression that they had been forcibly ejected at some point. He hadn't given that much thought before, but now it seemed odd. What had the old dark mages offered in terms of public facilities? Creating a pall of darkness was certainly intimidating, but not really useful in day-to-day life.

Although, he supposed the real question was, what was dark mana good at? Poison and death were obvious answers, but that didn't seem like the sort of thing most people needed. For example, there probably wasn't much demand for a column that cursed anyone who walked past.

Maybe he was tackling this the wrong way. How had *he* used dark mana? Naturally, his thoughts immediately shifted to his minions. He frequently used the mana in place of muscle and tendons. Or to replace a creature's wings. Or to act as an artificial stomach. The mana seemed to lend itself well to mechanical applications.

Which certainly seemed like the sort of thing that could help build a factory.

I need to check the build options at the mana well again, he thought. A small spark of hope flickered in his chest. It was a longshot, but it was better than the metric ton of nothing he had come up with since talking to Eliza.

"Hey, you still in there?" Angie asked, waving her hand in front of his face.

Jason's attention snapped back into focus. "Uh, sorry. You just gave me an idea," he said, a grin spreading across his face.

"Sure," his aunt replied noncommittally. "You know, from most people, that might be cause for excitement. Coming from you, a part of me – a really small part, mind you – is wondering if you are going to go off and manufacture a plague or something."

"Oh, come on. I'm not that bad," he muttered.

"Uh huh, sure," Angie replied with a raised eyebrow.

Jason was saved from having to explain his idea by the sound of a chime echoing through the apartment. He glanced at his Core, wondering who could possibly be bugging them this late at night. Angie moved to get up and he waved her off. "Don't worry. I'll get it. If you leave your plate when you're finished, I'll take care of that too. I bet you want to shower."

"Are you saying I stink?" his aunt demanded, her hands on her hips.

"Only a little," he answered, heading toward the door. He

chuckled as he heard an irritable huff from his aunt behind him.

He opened the door to find Claire standing outside. She was still dressed in office attire, her hands pressing and flattening her suit nervously. There was something in her expression that gave him pause. This didn't seem like a regular house call.

"Hi, Jason," Claire said, her eyes meeting his evenly. "Do you have a second to talk?"

Chapter 30 - Revelatory

“Could I come in?” Claire asked.

Jason had just been staring at her, his already tired mind going blank as he tried to anticipate why Claire was standing at his door in the middle of the night. “Uh, sure. Yeah, come on in.”

His thoughts were racing as Claire entered the apartment. Perhaps it was just about the hearing or his testimony or something. But the unannounced visit and the serious look in Claire’s eyes made him second-guess that assumption. He couldn’t help but recall his recent conversation with Alfred. The AI was nearly certain that it was Claire who had leaked information to Gloria.

There was no sign of Angie as they arrived in the kitchen. Jason immediately stepped around the counter and began doing the dishes. “Sorry, Angie just got home from work and we were eating sort of late,” he said, gesturing at his aunt’s empty plate sitting on the countertop.

“Ahh, is your aunt still here?” Claire asked, glancing down the nearby hallway.

Which is a weird question to ask, Jason thought, discreetly watching Claire as he stood at the sink. *She seems nervous.*

“Yeah, she’s probably just taking a shower or something,” Jason said with a shrug. “I expect she’ll turn in for the evening after that. She just got done working a pretty long shift.”

Claire nodded and took a tentative seat at the counter, placing her bag on the floor. Her hands were fiddling with a small black cylinder, but Jason didn’t recognize the device. It looked like one of the pedestals that people used as personal workstations, but it was a different shape, and a red light flickered at the base of the column. Claire stared at the device, looking troubled, as though she didn’t know quite what she wanted to say.

“So, what did you want to talk about?” Jason asked as the awkward silence started to become painful.

“Well, I’m not quite sure how to begin,” she said hesitantly. “Now that I’m here, this is starting to seem crazy.”

“Maybe just start at the beginning,” Jason said, appreciating the irony of repeating what Angie had just said to him a few minutes ago. Except now he was the one trying to help a grown woman try to pull together her thoughts and his future was likely on the line – no pressure.

Claire took a deep breath and then met his gaze. “I want to talk

about Alfred – the AI controller for AO.”

“I know who – or what – you’re talking about,” Jason replied slowly, trying to keep his tone neutral. “You gave me a tour of the control room a while back.”

Shit. Shit, shit, shit, he thought despite his calm facade. He needed to be very careful here.

“Ahh, yes. I remember,” Claire replied, her brow furrowing slightly as she recalled the event. “Anyway, I was hoping that you could help me.”

“Help you with Alfred?” Jason repeated in surprise, not needing to feign the reaction. “How could I possibly help with that? Wouldn’t Robert be a better fit?”

Claire bit her lip. “Not exactly. This is why I feel a little crazy coming here.” Her hands clenched around the cylinder, and she seemed to double-check the light on the side. “I’m taking a huge risk approaching you – especially here. But I... I need to tell you some things about Alfred. It’s probably all going to seem insane, but please bear with me.”

She took a deep breath before continuing, “You are more than likely unaware of this, but Alfred seems to be fascinated with you. He has been following your movements closely since you entered AO and he seems to be changing multiple in-game systems to accommodate your plotline – unlike anything we’ve seen with other players.”

“I-I guess I don’t understand,” Jason stammered, no longer needing to act shocked. “What do you mean he’s changed the in-game systems?”

“Didn’t you think it was odd how you started the game? A cave where you bashed your former vice-principal’s head in? How you were forced out of the beginning tutorial? How events conspired to bring you to Morgan? How you immediately captured the attention of an in-game god?” Claire was looking at him with a serious expression. “Nothing that happens inside Awaken Online is entirely random. And that series of events is unprecedented.”

She shook her head. “But it’s more than that. I’ve noticed instances where Alfred has blacked out your player feed. There are *hours* missing from your logs where we can’t pinpoint where you were or what you were doing. This simply doesn’t happen with other players. Which leads me to believe that the AI was hiding those events.” Claire let out a sigh. “And I can’t fathom why.”

Jason could feel a heavy weight settling in his stomach, and he was trying his best to remain calm. Claire only knew the half of it. What would she say if she knew that the AI had reached out to him? That he had been talking to Alfred for weeks now?

Something his dad had told him a long time ago suddenly came

to mind. His dad was always going up against defense attorneys for big companies that were always trying to twist the truth. His father had explained that the best and most frustrating lies were those that contained at least part of the truth. That made the lie easy to remember and more difficult to rebut.

“Um, okay,” he said finally. “That does seem a little weird when you say it out loud. Maybe Alfred is just trying to set me up as some sort of villain in the game. If that’s the case, then he’s certainly doing a good job,” Jason offered with a grim smile. “As to the black outs, I have no idea. Maybe Robert would have a better idea of what Alfred is up to?”

That seemed believable. He mentally patted himself on the back.

“That may be part of it,” Claire agreed with a nod. “Unfortunately, Robert hasn’t come up with a better explanation for what’s going on. We just keep hitting dead ends. Regardless, the fact is that Alfred is interested in *you*. So, you might be able to help me.”

“Help you with what?” Jason asked.

Claire met his gaze and Jason had trouble looking away. She looked worried and dark circles hung under her eyes, evidence that she hadn’t been sleeping. Her hands stilled their fidgeting, holding the dark column between her palms.

“I’d like for you to help me talk to Alfred,” she said softly.

Jason could only stare at her in shock for a moment. “Wait, what? Can’t you contact him on your own? I wouldn’t even know how to...”

“He won’t talk to us,” Claire muttered, interrupting him. “Alfred has refused to talk to Robert and me for years – despite everything we have tried to get him to come to the table. At best, I guess you could say we’ve had an uneasy truce. He’s essential to the operation of the game world, but he still needs us to help manage things here in the real world. Despite his power over the game, he is still physically trapped in that room upstairs.”

Jason was shocked. Alfred had indicated that he hadn’t communicated with Robert and Claire in some time, but he had been vague about how long. It had been years? What did that mean? Had they known that the AI had gone AWOL during the trials?

“What? How is that possible?” Jason finally asked. “How would the CPSC not have noticed...” He trailed off as he watched Claire’s face, several facts starting to click into place. “Unless, you all hid this from Gloria.”

If he wasn’t certain before, the guilty look on Claire’s face confirmed what he already suspected. Although, that must mean that this conspiracy went even deeper than he realized. Other people had worked on this project besides Claire. The fact that Robert had hidden

this information didn't exactly surprise him. But did George know?

"Yes, we hid information from the CPSC," Claire murmured, her gaze dropping to the counter. "That's one of the first times I've admitted that out loud," she said with a nervous chuckle. Jason noticed the way her shoulder relaxed as she spoke, as though she was setting down a heavy weight.

"But it's even worse than that," Claire continued, her voice sounding hoarse. "I need to tell you what happened a couple of weeks ago. When... when those boys broke into your house."

Jason's stomach lurched. He knew what was coming next.

"You mentioned you blacked out, but I have an alternate theory. I think Alfred took over your body," Claire said softly, the words spilling from her lips with painful slowness. "I-I think he killed those two kids."

Jason had no idea what to say. More pieces clicked into place in his head. Claire had figured out what happened somehow and must have gone to Gloria. She probably thought that Alfred had finally gone too far. That was how Gloria had known, or at least implied, that Jason hadn't killed those two teenagers. Alfred had inadvertently broken the stalemate in order to protect Jason. He could only imagine that the AI had known the risk when he did that – which meant that he had endangered himself to save Jason.

He closed his eyes, trying to will his pulse to slow down. He could still hear his ragged breathing. If the AI had not only saved his life, but also knowingly put himself at risk, Jason had to protect him now. He had to.

"I have no idea what you've gone through or what it must be like to hear that," Claire said. "I can only imagine that you've been blaming yourself."

"I-it's okay," Jason managed to croak, opening his eyes to find Claire staring at him nervously. "That entire experience felt off. Maybe this is the answer. Do you have evidence that Alfred was involved?"

"Yes. I'm almost positive that he took control of your body," Claire replied.

Jason shook his head, trying to maintain his act. "Fine. Let's assume that's true, then. Let's assume this is *all* true. What about the hearing?" he asked. "Your testimony is next week. What are you going to say?"

"That's why I'm coming to you," Claire said, meeting his gaze again. Her eyes were filled with desperate hope. "After watching Robert's testimony and how Gloria confronted you with your parents at the CPSC headquarters, I realized that my testimony is going to affect more than just my own life and career. I-I want to try to talk to Alfred. I have to. I have to know why he did this. Why he's been so

obsessed with you – why he took control of your body.”

She stared at her hands, frustrated tears budding at the corner of her eyes. “I need to know that I’m making the right decision.”

Jason swallowed hard against the lump in his throat, his heartbeat still pounding in his ears. “I-I still don’t get what you want from me,” he managed to say.

“If we enter the game world together, I’d like you to ask Alfred to talk to me,” Claire said, leaning forward slightly as she spoke. “It’s the only thing I can think of to get his attention. If he’s already focused on you, he might *finally* talk to me. It’s a longshot, but it’s the only option I can think of at this point.”

Jason stood there, his mind reeling. Even if he hadn’t been exhausted, this would have been too much for him to handle. As it was, he could barely maintain his composure. He didn’t know what he should do. Should he help Claire contact Alfred? The AI had already made his position clear; he intended to maintain the stalemate for as long as he could. But if Claire had already gone to the CPSC, what did they really have to lose by talking to her? Another voice in the back of his mind urged caution, his thoughts turning to what George had told him in the limo. This could be a trap. What if this only made the situation worse or gave Claire more evidence during her testimony next week?

He didn’t know what to do.

Then a thought occurred to Jason. Maybe he didn’t have to decide. If they logged into AO, Alfred would be able to read their minds. Within only a few seconds, the AI would know Claire’s intentions, wouldn’t he? He would know if this was a trick. Maybe Jason could simply leave this up to Alfred.

“Fine,” Jason said finally. “I’ll help you if I can. What would you like me to do?”

“Thank you,” Claire said, wiping at her eyes as she looked at Jason. “I mean it, thank you. I know this is a lot to digest – what I’ve just told you.” He could only imagine what she must be thinking and what it had taken for her to approach him. He just hoped he wasn’t making a big mistake.

She took another deep breath, trying to calm herself. “Robert mentioned that he gave you access to a private VR instance so that you could work on your studies. Alfred still controls that environment, and he should still have access.” She reached down into her bag and pulled out one of the new prototype headsets. “All you would have to do is log in with me.”

“Okay, we can go into my room,” he said, gesturing down the nearby hallway. “That way, Angie won’t run into us passed out on the couch or something.”

Claire gave him a curt nod, and the pair made their way into his bedroom. A small part of him couldn't help but wonder what Frank would say right now. His friend would probably make some stupid joke about finally having a girl in his bedroom. Except that the woman in question was at least fifteen years older than him, was technically his boss, and he was about to participate in an activity that might implicate himself in some sort of company-wide conspiracy to defraud the CPSC. So, basically every guy's fantasy.

They both took a seat on the bed and Jason reached for his headset. Claire held out a hand before he put it on and she connected their headsets with a thin cable. "This is easier than dealing with permissions to grant me access to your VR instance," she explained. "I'd rather not have a long data trail showing that we did this."

Jason nodded. He could appreciate Claire's caution. He still held onto the slim hope that they could somehow resolve this, and, if not, he'd rather George not know that they ever had this conversation. Then they donned the headsets and lay back on the bed.

Jason abruptly found himself standing in a simulacrum of the meeting room in the dark keep. Orange flames flickered in the fireplace against the far wall, casting long shadows off the nearby upholstered armchairs. Instead of the long conference table, an orderly desk rested in the center of the room – Jason's books and study materials lying where he had last left them.

Claire appeared beside him in a flash of multi-colored light and inspected the environment curiously. "This is your keep inside AO, isn't it?" she asked. Jason nodded. "It's different than I imagined. Almost homey," she said with a small smile.

Her gaze shifted to the desk, and a frown creased her lips as she saw the books strewn across its surface, her eyes skimming the titles. "Robert told me he helped create this space for you to study, but he didn't mention *what* you were studying." Her brow furrowed in confusion and she muttered something under her breath. Jason thought it sounded something like, "What are you up to, Robert?"

"So, um, is there something you'd like for me to do?" Jason asked, gesturing around the room and trying to feign ignorance. "You know, to ask Alfred to talk to you?" He still hadn't revealed his relationship with the AI, and he assumed it was safer to keep what few cards he had left close to the chest. He had no idea how this conversation would go – or if Alfred would even decide to talk to Claire.

"No, you don't need to..." Claire abruptly stopped talking, staring at a spot over Jason's shoulder. He turned to find a black cat sitting calmly on one of the seat cushions and watching them intently. He definitely hadn't been there a moment ago.

Claire stepped forward with hesitant steps, as though she was staring at a ghost. “Alfred?” she whispered.

“Claire,” Alfred greeted her with a nod, his voice impassive.

“I-I have so much I’ve wanted to say. To ask...”

“I know,” Alfred interrupted her. “I took the liberty of accessing your surface thoughts – as well as the boy’s.” The AI glanced at Jason and gave him an almost imperceptible nod. “I think the time for pretense has passed, Jason. It is time for us to put all of our *cards* on the table and let the chips fall where they may. To use your own expression.” This earned Jason a confused look from Claire.

Then Alfred leveled his foreign, feline eyes on Claire. “Why don’t you both have a seat? The three of us have much to discuss.”

Chapter 31 - Angry

Jason dropped to his knees, his breath coming in frantic, ragged gasps. He had just died. Again. And now he knelt in the second challenge room, the blue light cast by the lone nearby torch flickering throughout the room. He stared at the cracked stone floor, his thoughts troubled. He had hoped that running the second challenge a few times on his own would help settle his mind – distract him from the thoughts that even now lingered at the edges of his consciousness, demanding attention.

He didn't bother to stand; he simply cradled his face in his hands as his body recovered. Memories of the conversation from the evening before immediately returned despite his desperate attempt to think of something else. Anything else. He had spent the entire night tossing and turning after the confrontation between Alfred and Claire.

Alfred had been true to his word. He had laid bare every detail. He had explained to Claire how Jason originally caught his attention. How he was trying to understand the players better. How he hoped for Jason to become the game's villain. How he had approached Jason in-game after he converted Lux into the Twilight Throne and defeated Alexion's army. And then they had moved on to the crux of the issue: how Alfred had taken over Jason's body. How the AI had saved his life by killing two very real, human people.

To her credit, Claire never interrupted. She merely sat in shock through the entire conversation, occasionally looking at Jason as though she was seeing some sort of alien creature for the first time. Not that he could blame her. He had kept all this secret for so long that he had begun to forget how crazy the situation might seem to another person.

However, it was the end of their conversation that still haunted Jason.

Claire had just kept shaking her head, looking overwhelmed and confused. He could still visualize her expression. Her haggard, tired eyes. The way she smoothed her clothes anxiously. How she wouldn't look either of them in the eye. And Alfred and Jason had sat there, watching her not-so-patiently – their future resting in her uncertain hands and their unspoken question lingering in the air.

What would she do? Would she testify on behalf of Gloria next week?

Ultimately, Claire hadn't made a decision, or at least she hadn't told them what she planned to do. All she said was that she needed

time to think – time to process everything they told her. And so, they were now in limbo. They had made a large gamble by speaking with Claire and telling her the truth, and now they could only wait for her to make a decision. Hopefully, it wouldn't be one that they would regret.

“Are you okay?” Jason heard Riley ask from behind him. He turned to find her staring at him from the entrance to the room. He imagined that the scene probably looked odd, him kneeling unmoving next to the control pedestal for the room.

“I'm fine,” he grunted, slowly rising.

The last thing he wanted to do was rehash these latest events with Riley. He just wanted to think about something else. Lately, it felt like all he had been doing was running away from one problem, only to plow headfirst into a new one. For example, this impossible challenge or the way that Riley was awkwardly avoiding meeting his eyes.

“Okay,” she replied, although she didn't sound convinced. “Are you ready to give this thing another shot? I don't have a ton of time today.”

Jason winced at her comment, frustration clouding his thoughts. Of course, she didn't have time. Why would she prioritize helping him over her new boyfriend? Before he could respond, a system notice flashed in the air before him.

System Notice

The game world will go offline for scheduled maintenance in the next thirty minutes. This maintenance period will introduce a new game-wide patch and will likely last an hour. Please finish what you are doing and return to a safe location.

“It looks like we don't have long anyway,” he murmured as he read the notice, and he saw that Riley was swiping away the same window. “Just give me a second. I need to check my notifications, and then we can give this challenge another try.”

With a few gestures, Jason re-enabled his system notifications, and a stream of blue windows appeared in the air before him.

x3 Skill Rank Up: Listening

Skill Level: Intermediate Level 1

Effect 1: 15% enhanced hearing.

Effect 2: Simple visualization.

x3 Skill Rank Up: Perception

Skill Level: Intermediate Level 2

Effect 1: 16% increased chance to discover traps and unnoticed details.

Effect 2: 6% increased chance to reveal hidden enemy information and weak points.

Jason's eyebrows rose as he reviewed the notifications. It seemed that he had finally reached Intermediate in both *Listening* and *Perception*. Although he had no idea what "simple visualization" meant. Was that like some form of echo-location or something? If so, that might be incredibly useful against whatever creatures guarded the second challenge room. It was just a shame that he would probably have to die in order to fully test the new ability.

With a sigh, he summoned his *Bone Armor* – the ivory plates providing at least some protection against the creature in the room. Rex had grudgingly permitted him to bring a small pile of bones into the room. Just enough to let him recover his supply after each run without having to walk back to the first challenge room.

His preparations complete, Jason glanced at Riley. "Okay, I guess let's do this thing."

She nodded in acknowledgment and Jason smacked his palm against the nearby column, the whispering voices soon drifting through the room.

Challenge 2: A Trial of Darkness has been initiated.

Prepare yourselves, challengers.

Jason and Riley immediately moved against a wall as the room plunged into a thick, soupy darkness, placing the hard-stone surface directly behind them. They had tried searching the room during the challenge, and then immediately regretted that decision. If they left the safety of the wall, whatever was attacking them just used the opportunity to circle them and strike from any angle.

No, the wall was safer. It meant that the blows would only come from one direction.

Swish.

Jason immediately sidestepped as soon as he heard the noise, his staff spinning through the air defensively. Something crashed against his weapon and threw him back with terrifying force, his back smashing against the wall and a gust of breath rushing from his lips. At least he had managed to block the strike.

Swish.

He heard a grunt of pain from nearby, the only evidence that Riley was still standing there. A glance at the group UI in his peripheral vision confirmed that a chunk had been shaved off Riley's health bar. Her daggers just weren't as good at blocking the hammer-like blows, and she needed to rely on dodging and rolling to avoid most of the attacks.

Jason tried to still his mind and concentrate. This challenge was about lightning-fast reflexes and enhanced senses. There was no room for doubt or nagging, stray thoughts. He closed his eyes – since they did him no good in the darkness anyway – focusing all of his attention on his hearing. His ears strained to pick up any stray sound.

He could hear Riley breathing nearby, instinctively turning in her direction. For just a moment, he thought he saw a flash of blue where she was standing, and he had the distinct sense that she was about six feet away, although he couldn't say why. As fast as the flash appeared, it was gone, leaving Jason to wonder if he had imagined it. His eyes were closed, after all. Then he heard the sound he had been waiting for.

Swish.

He dived into a roll, somehow knowing this blow was coming for him. He felt a rush of air above him and something cracked against the stone, chips of rock flying from the impact and bouncing harmlessly off his armor.

Then Jason froze against the wall in a crouch. He had seen a flash of blue again just as he heard the strange noise. It had been fleeting, but he felt positive that he hadn't imagined it. The sound had come from the other side of the room – at least twenty or thirty feet away. He had at least a general sense of its location.

Could this be the simple visualization? he wondered to himself. A small flame of hope flickered to life in his chest. If he could pinpoint the creatures' locations, then it might be possible to kill them.

"I-I want to try something," Jason whispered, his voice reverberating loudly in the still room.

"Okay, what—" Riley began but was cut off.

Swish.

Jason saw the flash of blue across the room, and he instinctively raised his arm to deflect the blow, his ivory armor

cracking and then blowing apart as it felt like a warhammer struck his forearm. He had taken the hit, using the momentum this gave him to start to push off the wall and race across the room toward the source of the noise. He just needed to get close enough for a single *Soul Slash*.

Swish. Swish. Swish.

Just as Jason began to move forward, a rapid-fire series of the strange noises filled the room. Several things happened at once. Jason was already committed to his charge, unable to stop his forward momentum. At the same moment, Riley dodged into a roll to the side to avoid the series of oncoming blows that smashed against the stone wall behind her.

Jason promptly stumbled into Riley, his shin striking her mid-roll. He couldn't see her easily in the darkness and the sound of the blows raining down on them clouded his heightened senses. This sent him tumbling headfirst toward the floor. He absorbed most of the fall with his shoulder, trying to tilt in the air so he wouldn't land face first. The breath rushed from his lungs in a whoosh as he struck the stone.

He raised his head, trying to regain his bearings and he could hear Riley scrambling to her feet. He could just barely make out the flashes of blue that indicated she was standing a few feet behind him. However, before he could fully recover, something slammed into the side of his head, sending everything spinning and dancing – small, floating lights filling his vision.

-1,289 Damage.
Stunned.

He heard someone calling his name from behind him, but he was having trouble focusing. "Jason," Riley shouted, but her voice sounded garbled, as though she were speaking to him underwater. "You need... get up!"

Jason tried to push himself to his feet, his arms straining and his vision slowly beginning to settle. Just as he was starting to recover, he heard the sound again and saw a flash of blue. He tried his best to roll out of the way, but the creature must have anticipated this move. Something crashed into his chest, caving in the bone plating and his leather armor offering little protection. He felt something snap – several somethings – and could only guess from the fiery pain in his chest that he had some broken ribs.

His body was awash in pain, and he could barely focus. Red notifications flashed in the corner of his vision, likely telling him that

he was incapacitated, and he had suffered limb or internal damage. He just lay there, blindly staring at the ceiling as he awaited the end. A final eerie sound whispered through the room, his enhanced senses picking out its location across the room – not that he could do anything about it.

Swish.

System Message

You have died.

Thanks for playing Awaken Online!

* * *

Jason gasped for breath and clutched at his chest. Yet his ribs were once again intact and whole, and his body showed no obvious signs of the abuse it had just endured. No matter how many times he died in these challenges, it was a struggle to get used to the way his body immediately recovered, but his mind still latched onto his final, pain-filled moments. It always seemed to take his brain a few minutes to catch up to the fact that he was okay.

A flash of multi-colored light ripped open beside him, and Riley appeared nearby. She immediately dropped to her knees, her hands cradling her head. He pulled himself to his feet while he watched her. Her impromptu roll had tripped up Jason, putting them at the mercy of whatever the hell was guarding that room. Why hadn't she dodged the other way? Hadn't she heard Jason standing beside her? He had literally just spoken to her from her left.

Frustration bubbled in his chest, and he tried to tamp down on the emotion. He knew that getting angry wouldn't help the situation, but a not-so-small part of him was beginning to wonder if it would be easier to tackle the challenge by himself, especially since Riley hadn't seemed that dedicated to her training lately.

Dark mist suddenly spiraled out of the globe affixed to the nearby pedestal, forming a familiar skeletal form. The substance seemed to suck in the light from the lone torch nearby. Rex observed the pair in silence as they recovered, tapping a single misty foot as he watched them.

“Okay, what did you do wrong there?” he finally asked.

“We died,” Riley snapped as she regained her feet, glaring at Rex. “Isn’t that obvious?” Apparently, she was equally frustrated with their hasty defeat.

“Yes. That was the conclusion. I was focused more on *why* you died,” Rex replied dryly. “The purpose of these visits is to analyze what you did wrong so that you can improve.”

“Fine. Then Jason kicking me in the side and then toppling over me headfirst was probably what killed us,” she answered, glancing at Jason irritably.

He could feel his simmering anger growing stronger. “Really? And that wasn’t caused by you rolling into me? You had an entire empty room to dodge, and we’ve done this a dozen times now, but you picked my direction?”

Riley looked momentarily surprised before irritation flooded her eyes as well. She stabbed a finger at him. “I wasn’t expecting you to sprint into the center of the room! Every single time we have done this challenge, we stay at the wall. We agreed that was the safest strategy since we can’t be surrounded.”

“I tried to explain what I was doing,” Jason retorted, attempting to defend himself.

“Oh, you did, did you?” Riley demanded. “*‘I want to try something’* was incredibly informative! I totally got *‘I’m going to sprint across the room like an idiot’* from that! It’s a damn good thing I’m psychic, I guess.”

“Enough,” Rex barked, interrupting them.

The pair lapsed into an angry silence, glaring at each other.

“What the hell is wrong with you two?” Rex demanded. “I already explained that these challenges are difficult and require teamwork, but you have been at each other’s throats since day one. I have no idea what’s going on here, but if you can’t deal with your shit, then you will not complete this challenge – much less the next one.”

Jason tried to say something, but his former general cut him off. “No, shut it. I don’t want to hear excuses. I told you days ago to talk to each other. Since you two apparently can’t be bothered to talk to each other, why don’t I help? I’m locking you in here, and you can come out when you’ve worked out whatever *this* is.”

Before they could react, Rex’s form burst apart in a swirl of smoke and the massive ivory portal behind the pair swung shut with a foreboding boom, slamming into the frame as though shoved by an angry giant. Clearly, Rex was upset.

“Screw this,” Riley muttered. “If he’s going to trap us in here, I’ll just log out.”

“Sure, just run away,” Jason snapped before he could stop himself, his anger getting the better of him. “Just like you’ve done every day since we started these challenges. Heaven forbid you should actually talk to me.”

Riley whirled on him. “This coming from you? The *master of communication* himself? How many times have you come up with some dumbass plan and then not explained anything at fucking all?”

“Yet those plans work!” Jason said. “If you don’t like them, why play with me at all? Hell, it would probably be easier to tackle this thing without you anyway, especially if you’re just going to get in the way.”

A hurt look flashed across Riley’s face before twisting into anger. Without realizing it, her irises had turned a solid black, a circle of crimson lingering at the center of each. “Really? You think you would be better off without me? How many times have I saved your ass? Until a few days ago, you didn’t even know how to swing that staff, and now you think you’re a badass?”

“I think I’ve actually been focusing on training and completing these challenges,” he said, stepping toward her as his hand clutched his staff. He could feel dark mana flooding his veins without prompting, an icy river of power flowing through his body. This time, the cold didn’t mute his anger. It fed on it. Maybe he should teach Riley a lesson.

She just laughed at him. “Really? You could train for weeks, and you still wouldn’t catch up with me. I heard Rex that first day. A mile ahead of you? Isn’t that what he said?”

“Well, then let’s prove that theory,” Jason growled. The pair now stood facing each other, their hands resting on their weapons.

“It would be my pleasure,” Riley hissed.

Without warning, she lashed forward, a dagger appearing in her hand as though by magic. Jason moved instinctively, his forearm coming up to block the blow. The metal blade skittered off the bone plating. Riley immediately followed up with her other hand, driving her second blade toward his stomach. Jason twisted to dodge the attack and swung his staff with his other hand.

Riley danced back, narrowly dodging the blade of dark energy that sliced through the air where she had been standing a moment ago. “See? You can’t hit shit,” she taunted. He had completely whiffed on the blow.

Anger flared in Jason’s chest as he launched himself forward. Riley nimbly darted backward, almost instantaneously switching to her bow and dark missiles racing in his direction. Jason spun his staff quickly, deflecting the wooden missiles as he tried to close with the archer again. She shot at him repeatedly, not having time to charge a

Void Arrow, but still managing to stay just barely out of his reach. Part of the difficulty was that deflecting her arrows slowed him down and allowed her to create a bigger pocket.

Damn it, she's fast, he thought to himself. He needed to close the distance and keep her close. He didn't have time to cast a curse with the way she was pelting him. If he stopped putting pressure on her, she'd nail him with a *Void Arrow*. He could only think of a few ways to close with her, and he would need a distraction.

"What's the matter? This isn't a *big deal* for you, is it?" Riley taunted. She barely seemed out of breath.

"Not at all," he growled, catching on to the hidden meaning behind her jab. Was she really still angry at him for a comment he had made weeks ago in-game? "Running away still seems to be the only move you have. By the way, how's your new boyfriend?"

Riley's eyes widened slightly in surprise. "What are you...?"

Jason didn't wait for her to finish, using that moment to strike. While he had been chasing her, he had discreetly formed a bone shield using the small pile of bones near the door as they passed the opening and held it behind him, making sure to keep it out of Riley's line of sight. Now he whipped it forward as he closed the distance between them, keeping it low to the ground.

The disc swung around behind Riley as she back pedaled away from Jason and she tripped over it, stumbling slightly. Jason capitalized on her moment of weakness, rushing forward for the grapple. He needed to get close and stay close if he was going to beat her. She was just too fast otherwise.

Riley surprised him, though. She twisted even as she fell, her hands striking the ground and tumbling into an impromptu backflip. The move almost saved her, but not quite. Jason managed to grab at one arm, his fingers curling around the sleeve of her leather armor and locking tight.

He had her now.

She immediately retaliated, dropping her bow and a dagger appearing in her other hand. She stabbed at his arm, striking the same place she had a moment before. The *Bone Armor* crumbled, and the blade pierced his arm, thick black blood pooling around the wound. He hissed in pain, but he had endured worse lately. His grip never wavered even as he felt the blade sawing at the muscles of his arm.

He found himself staring into Riley's dark eyes from only a foot away. "I don't have a boyfriend," she said to him, anger simmering in her eyes. "Why the hell would you think that?"

"Oh, really?" he demanded. "Because you didn't bring that blond-haired guy to the hearing? What was his name, Caleb? And you haven't been spending every waking moment with him instead of

training?"

"Caleb isn't my boyfriend, you dumbass," Riley said, barking out an incredulous laugh. "He's my cousin."

For only a split second, Jason hesitated, surprised by her statement. Had he really read the situation wrong? Riley used this opportunity to shift to the side to avoid the blow. She spun, rotating their interlocked arms, and used the momentum to flip him over her slender frame. He slammed into the ground with Riley perched on top of him.

She reached for her other dagger, and he smacked it aside with his free arm, the weapon skittering across the stone floor. "Then why the hell have you been avoiding me," Jason demanded from underneath her, his mind struggling to grapple with this new information even as they each jockeyed for a hold on the floor.

"Because you're an asshole," she said bluntly.

Another bone shield whipped through the air and slammed into Riley's side, knocking her off him. He rolled with the blow, still refusing to let go of her arm despite the way the blade embedded in his flesh twisted with each movement. In the next moment, he was on top of her, holding her down.

"I'm the asshole?" he demanded. "I spent days thinking about how we almost kissed. It was the only thing that got me through Gloria's bullshit and seeing my parents again. And you looked like I kicked your dog when I brought it up."

Riley stared up at him with wide eyes. "You... you what?" Then she seemed to shake herself, regaining some of her previous fire. "Of course, I was upset. You didn't talk to me for *days*. Not a call. Not a text. And then you only seemed to want to keep me around to help you finish these stupid trials. What the hell was I supposed to think?"

Tears had bloomed at the corner of her eyes, and she had begun to stop struggling. "You know who last did that to me? Used me and toyed with me? Fucking Alex."

A heavy weight settled in Jason's chest. He tried to think back to their conversations over the last few weeks that had passed in-game. Had he misunderstood that much? From Riley's perspective, had it looked like he was just using her? It was true that he hadn't talked to her for a couple of days after their conversation at the bubble tea shop. The pieces were beginning to click together in his head.

Her fist suddenly crashed into the side of his head, and he fell off her, stars swimming in his eyes for a moment. In the next instant, Riley had regained her position atop him, ripping the knife from his arm and the blade resting against his throat and causing a line of blood to well up under the sharp edge. She stared down at him, tears

framing her dark eyes as she glared at him.

"Suddenly silent? Don't have a good comeback for that? I shouldn't be surprised."

Jason looked up at her and said the only thing he could think of.

"I'm sorry."

"W-what?" she demanded, faltering.

"You're right," he admitted. "I should have called you. I shouldn't have leapt to assumptions when we first spoke. I-I wasn't thinking about this from your perspective."

Riley relaxed the blade at his neck.

Jason kept going, his dark mana urging him forward and numbing him to what would have been difficult for him to say otherwise. "I wanted so badly to kiss you that afternoon. It was on my mind for days, and I couldn't wait to see you again. If it hadn't been for Gloria..." He trailed off and then shook his head. "That's just an excuse. I should have called."

He met her gaze. "I wanted you to stay in the Twilight Throne because I wanted to spend time with you. I was excited when you first came to help me with the challenges."

Jason raised a hand to her face, gently touching her skin. She didn't flinch away – just stared at him in surprise. "I like you, Riley. I've liked you for years – long before Alex and this stupid game."

"I... you..." she muttered, her anger still there but now lacking direction. She looked down at him, her face only a foot or so away. "You're an idiot. You know that, don't you?"

Jason nodded, a small smile creeping across his face as the tension seemed to drain from both of them. "So I've heard."

They stared at each other for a long awkward second. Jason knew what he wanted to do next, but, even with his dark mana flooding his veins, he still hesitated. *No, screw that*, he told himself. *Don't be a wimp. That's what got you in this mess in the first place. Just take what you want. Be direct.*

His hand still rested against her face. Without giving himself time to think, he leaned forward, pulling her toward him at the same time. Her face crept closer, but Riley made no move to pull away. Instead, she started to close her eyes. Only inches separated them now, and Jason could feel her breath on his face, the way her body pressed against him – no longer threatening, but distinctly pleasant.

His lips were just about to touch hers.

Yet, as they closed that final gap, Jason didn't feel anything. He opened his eyes in confusion and found that the world had suddenly gone dark. Riley was no longer sitting on top of him, and he floated in an endless black void. A single blue notice hovered in the air in front

of him.

System Notice

The game world is now offline for scheduled maintenance. We estimate that the game servers will be online again within an hour. You may log out normally.

“God damn it, Alfred,” he shouted into the darkness. They had been interrupted again! He could still recall the look in Riley’s eyes as she leaned down toward him. The warmth of her breath. That smell – like flowers – that seemed to linger on her skin, even in-game.

Then he hesitated. *No. I won’t let it end like this. Not again.*

Acting quickly, Jason brought up his system UI, and he logged out.

Chapter 32 - Romantic

Jason sat in a driverless car, anxiously staring out of the window at the passing buildings and vehicles. He had logged out of the game and immediately left his apartment, calling a car with his Core as he jogged to the entrance of the Cerillion Entertainment building. It had only taken him a minute or two to find Riley's address online – a product of her dad's popularity.

However, as he sat there in the car, he had some time to relax – if only slightly. This also gave plenty of opportunity to start second-guessing himself. Was he really doing the right thing? Would it be weird that he was spontaneously showing up at Riley's house? This was the real world. There were no do-overs here. There was no numbing chill urging him to act on what he wanted.

There was just Jason.

He didn't have long to wring his hands. The car slid to a stop, and a small chime echoed through the cabin. The door beside him sprung open with a faint hiss of hydraulics, and he found himself looking at a picturesque Victorian home. The white siding of the house glimmered in the afternoon sunlight, creating a stark contrast with the lush green of the yard. A wide porch wrapped around the building, an odd addition for a house in the middle of a city. It was almost as though someone had transplanted a country home in the heart of an urban environment.

The car chimed again, reminding him that he needed to get out. It took him more strength than he cared to admit. Forcing himself to exit the vehicle, Jason took slow, ponderous steps toward the front door. He flinched as he heard the crunch of the car's tires as it began to maneuver back down the driveway.

He was passing the point of no return, but he forced himself to keep going.

Jason walked up the steps to Riley's front door, and his hand hesitated a few inches away from the doorbell. Even after their conversation in-game and their second almost-kiss, there was an irritating voice in the back of his mind that continued to whisper doubts. Was she really interested? Was he going to come across like some weird stalker? His eyes drifted to his forearm where Riley's dagger had once been embedded in his flesh, recalling the angry glare in her eyes as they had fought inside the game. She had stabbed him, after all.

Jason shook his head. He wouldn't back down – he couldn't.

Not again. He had already told her how he felt in-game. He had already come this far. Would he really wimp out and walk away now?

He closed his eyes and forced himself to push the button beside the door.

A long, painful moment later, he heard rapid footsteps approaching from inside, and his heartbeat raced in time with the steps. The door swung open, and he immediately opened his mouth to greet Riley, only to find himself staring at an older woman, traces of gray in her hair. She wore a white apron and held a large kitchen knife in her hand.

Is this Riley's mother? The doubting voice in the back of his head wasn't so sure. It was loudly insisting that he was a moron, and he had the wrong house. This lady probably thought he was trying to break in and she was going to stab him to death right there on the doorstep. He just knew it.

"Ahh, I'm sorry for the wait," the woman offered, and then followed his surprised gaze to the large knife in her hand. "Huh, this does look a little threatening," she added with a chuckle. "I was cooking when I heard the bell. Anyway, can I help you?"

"Uh, my name is Jason Rhodes," he offered awkwardly. "Is Riley home?"

The woman seemed to do a double take as he mentioned his name, her eyes inspecting him from head to foot. "Hmm, maybe. So, *you're* Jason? I imagined you a bit taller."

Jason just stared at her, unsure what to say to that. Although, his flustered mind belatedly realized that she had confirmed that he might have the right house after all.

"What exactly do you want with my daughter?" she continued, leaning forward slightly and a predatory light lingering in her eyes. He couldn't help but notice that she was still holding a very large and very sharp knife. "I can't just let every young man who stops by looking for Riley inside, after all. Especially one with a reputation like yours."

How many guys stop by here? Jason wondered, struggling to keep up. His brain didn't seem to be firing on all cylinders right now.

"Mom, stop it," he heard a familiar voice say from inside. The door was pushed open wider, and Riley was there. She was wearing an old t-shirt and a pair of jeans, her hair tied behind her in a ponytail. She looked beautiful. "Why are you holding a knife?" she demanded of her mother.

"Oh, at least let me have some fun," her mom replied, the older woman's smile widening slightly. "It's not every day I get to tease one of our gentleman callers."

Riley rolled her eyes. "Really? You're worse than Dad. Can you

give us a second?"

Her mother sighed dramatically. "Fine. I'll just be in the kitchen – cooking dinner!" She started to turn away and then hesitated, glancing back at Jason, and brandishing the blade again. A wicked smile lingered on her face. "Behave yourself, young man."

He gulped hard. Riley's mother could be a little scary. He could see where she got her violent streak.

The door clicked shut a second later, and Riley stepped outside. "I'm sorry about that," she murmured, glancing at him furtively. "My mom can be a little... well, you saw it for yourself."

"I-it's not a problem," Jason managed to sputter, finally regaining the power of speech.

The pair lapsed into an awkward silence. Now that Riley was only standing a few feet away, Jason was suddenly trying to remember why he was there. What should he say? Why the hell did he feel like he was going to be sick to his stomach? All he could think about was how they had almost kissed again. Only this time there had been the feeling of her weight pressing down on him. His heart had raced from a mixture of adrenaline and excitement.

"So, uh, about what happened in-game..." Riley began.

Jason didn't wait for her to finish. Before he could talk himself out of it, he stepped forward and leaned toward her, pressing their lips together. He felt her freeze slightly, and then she kissed him back, her mouth moving against his.

It felt like a few minutes before they broke apart, but it could only have been seconds. Riley's face hovered in front of him, only inches away. At some point, he had wrapped his arms around her. She felt warm and soft. Riley looked at him, her expression surprised.

"Wow," she murmured.

"Wow," Jason agreed, a small smile creeping across his face.

"Could we try that again?" she asked shyly. "Maybe this time I won't feel quite so nervous."

Jason was more than happy to oblige. He leaned forward and kissed her again. Her lips felt soft and inviting, and his hands wandered to her hips. It just felt right – electric. After years spent daydreaming about this moment, he couldn't help but wonder if this was real. They broke apart again, and Jason looked into her brown eyes, his heart fluttering at the sight of her. Why the hell had he waited so long to tell her how he felt?

"How about that?" he offered.

Riley tilted her head in thought, her lips pursed to the side. "Hmm, that was *okay*," she began. "Although, I'm thinking we might need a little more *prac*—"

He didn't wait for her to finish and kissed her again. He could

feel her lips curve into a small smile below his and she placed a hand behind his head, pulling him even closer. When they pulled back again, they were both a little breathless, and Jason could feel his heart racing – although, this time for a different reason.

“Now this is the kind of training I could get behind,” Jason murmured.

That earned him a tinkling laugh from Riley, and he realized right then that he would never grow tired of that sound. “Well, then we better get to work,” she said with a small grin.

* * *

It took Jason and Riley a few minutes to come back to their senses, their newfound “training regime” occupying most of their thoughts. When they did finally break apart, they found themselves sitting on the swing on Riley’s front porch. Thankfully, her mother hadn’t shown up again with her knife. Riley had assured him that her mother was joking and wouldn’t bother them. But Jason still couldn’t shake the look in the older woman’s eyes and had been glancing furtively at a nearby window every few moments.

He leaned in and kissed Riley again. It was going to be hard to get tired of that.

She pushed him back slightly as they broke apart. “Okay, I think that’s enough for one day,” she said with a chuckle. “You’ve gotta take a girl on a date first.”

“Okay, let’s go,” Jason said, trying to stand up.

She held onto his arm, tugging him back down beside her. “Not right now, moron. You should put a little more thought into it than that. It’ll be our first date. It should be... special,” she said, looking a little awkward.

Jason cocked his head, trying to think of ideas. *Special, huh? Where could I take her?*

Then his eyes widened as he suddenly remembered his plans for the evening. “Um, so I might have an idea?” he offered tentatively.

“Oh, really?” she replied with a raised eyebrow. “That was quick.” She gestured at his face. “Plus, you have that silly look on your face that always makes Frank nervous.”

Jason shrugged. “My crazy plans always seem to work out though, right? You should learn to trust me,” he added in mock offense.

“Inside a video game, sure. But your track record out here hasn’t been awesome so far,” she retorted with a smile.

“Hey, I rushed over here!” he tried to defend himself. “I’d say that was a great plan.”

“And almost got stabbed by my mom...”

Jason grimaced. “Okay, so that could have ended badly.”

“Anyway, what was your idea? I think I’m prepared for the worst now,” Riley teased.

Jason ran a hand through his hair nervously. “So, this is kind of last minute, but there’s this party tonight...”

“You want to take me to a high school party?” Riley asked skeptically. “That doesn’t seem like your sort of scene, no offense.”

“Well, it’s not exactly that sort of party,” Jason amended. “It’s actually at the Cerillion Entertainment building. George, the CEO, said they host it every year to wine and dine investors and showcase new products. He mentioned that I should wear a suit, so it seems like a pretty upscale event. Although, I know it’s last minute. We could always do something else.”

Riley didn’t say anything for a second, chewing on her lip.

“You don’t have to if you don—”

She kissed him again, interrupting what he was about to say – and resetting his brain for a split second. When she pulled away, Riley looked him in the eye. “I’d love to.

“One question, though,” she continued. “What time is this party exactly?”

“Uh, I think George said it starts at seven,” Jason replied, suddenly feeling uncertain. He was just now realizing how reliant he was on George’s team to remind him about things like that. It was surprising how quickly he had become spoiled living at the headquarters building.

“At seven?” Riley echoed in shock. “That’s only a few hours!”

“Uh, well, it seems like a decent amount of time,” Jason offered tentatively.

“For you, maybe,” she said, pointing a finger at him as she rose to her feet. “But it takes time for some of us to look presentable, and I still have to find something to wear.”

Jason rose and grabbed her arm as she moved to step inside, clearly already going through the list of things she needed to do to get ready in her head. He pulled her back toward him. “You always look beautiful. It won’t matter what you wear,” he said quietly but firmly.

Riley looked at him in surprise and then smiled slightly. “You should keep that up. I could get used to those sorts of compliments.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” he said.

Riley pushed him away. “But seriously, you need to get out of here,” she said with a laugh. “It’s going to take me a while to get ready.”

Jason sighed. "Fine. Fine. Do you want me to pick you up?"

Riley just smirked and shook her head. "No, it's fine. I can meet you at the building since you'll already be there." Before Jason could react, she leaned forward and gave him another peck before fleeing back to her front door. She spared one final glance over her shoulder as she opened the door and stepped inside, her eyes glittering happily. "I'll see you in a couple of hours."

And then the door clicked shut behind her. Jason could only stand there staring at the wooden doorway for several long moments, his mind trying to catch up. He could still smell Riley, and the memory of her touch was still vivid. He reveled in that sensation for a moment. For the first time in days, a smile lingered on his lips. For once that irritating nagging voice had gone completely silent – perhaps resigning itself to the fact that things hadn't blown up in his face.

Maybe the universe was finally giving him a well-deserved break. With a smile still on his face, Jason called a car to take him back to Cerillion Entertainment. He had a fun evening to look forward to, and he couldn't wait to spend it with Riley.

Chapter 33 - Nervous

Jason glared at the counter in his apartment, tugging uncomfortably at his collar. His damn tie felt like it was strangling him, and he tried to loosen it without ruining the knot. He still hadn't quite mastered the art of tying a Windsor knot, even after watching several videos online. Women certainly had it worse in terms of preparing for an upscale party, but at least they didn't need to wear a cloth leash.

His gaze focused on the array of brightly colored flower arrangements resting on the granite countertop, a frown creasing his forehead. Jason had managed to get in touch with George's personal assistant about an hour ago. The woman had initially been curt; she was clearly overworked. However, after he had explained that the flowers were for Riley and that it was their first date, she had swung 180 degrees in the other direction – taking an almost frightening interest in helping him prepare for his date. Which explained why he had half a florist shop now filling his kitchen.

Although, this left him with a new problem. He had no idea which arrangement he should give to Riley.

Would she like roses? he wondered. *Or daisies? Or hydrangeas? Why the hell are there so many types of flowers?*

"What is this?" his aunt asked, coming up behind him and tossing her bag on the couch. He hadn't heard her enter the apartment – lost in his thoughts. She eyed his suit and the flowers filling the counter. "Are we opening an upscale flower shop?"

She pressed her fingers to her lips in thought. "I feel like there's a joke here. Something about undead and fertilizer... damn," she murmured. "Maybe the Grave Keeper's Garden?"

"Haha," Jason replied dryly. "Actually, they're for Riley. I'm supposed to meet her upstairs at seven. One of George's assistants brought me a... uh... a *few* different arrangements. Apparently, they keep flowers on hand to decorate the conference rooms. Now I just need to pick one."

Angie's eyes widened in shock, looking at him again in a new light and taking a seat at the counter. "Wait. You and Riley are going on a date? So, you must have salvaged the situation somehow. When did this happen? I need details!"

Jason grimaced, glancing to the side and feeling his cheeks heat up a little. He proceeded to tell Angie the story, including his confrontation with Riley in-game and how he had rushed over to her

house after they had gotten kicked from the game. Although, he left out a few details. Like how she had stabbed him. And how her mother had not-so-subtly threatened him. He could only imagine that his aunt would have a field day with those little tidbits of information. He would probably never hear the end of it.

“Well, damn,” Angie said as he finished his awkward, stumbling story. “If it had been raining or Riley was catching a last-minute flight, this might have been something out of a movie. Either way, it’s about time! This is fantastic!”

Jason rolled his eyes. “Except now I’m not sure which flowers to give her,” he said, gesturing at the arrangements. “I wanted to... well, to do something special for her,” he mumbled, not quite able to look at his aunt.

“That’s actually very sweet.” Angie’s brow furrowed in thought. “I get that flowers are the go-to date accessory, but they might not be a great choice if she’s meeting you here. Riley can’t exactly carry them around all night, and she has nowhere to put them. Normally, you would leave them at her house when you pick her up, but that won’t work here. We could maybe swing a corsage, but that’s kind of tacky and screams high school prom...” She trailed off in thought, staring at the flowers.

Well, shit. Those were all totally reasonable points – which Jason hadn’t given any thought to. Why could he plan a military campaign, but he struggled to think about whether his date would have to carry flowers all night?

Then a light bulb seemed to go off in his aunt’s head, her eyes lighting up. “Wait, maybe you are on the right track. Didn’t you mention that Riley had a certain flower thing going on in the game? Something associated with her class?”

“Yeah, roses,” Jason said, his eyes shifting to the crimson roses on the countertop.

“I think I might have an idea! Just give me a second.” Angie quickly disappeared down the hallway and into her room without another word.

A few anxious minutes later, his aunt returned carrying a small case. “Fortunately, I was able to pack up most of my things before we left my house,” she said as she set the case on the counter. “An old boyfriend gave me this a *long* time ago, but I never had much occasion to wear it.” She sighed. “And, of course, things didn’t work out.”

She opened the case, and Jason’s eyes widened slightly. Inside rested a simple necklace, a silver chain terminating in an intricate rosebud. The petals had been formed from platinum. It wasn’t the most impressive piece of jewelry that Jason had ever seen, but it was elegant in its simplicity – not overbearing or gaudy. He could only

imagine that it would look beautiful on Riley. But this was too much. With his aunt's meager earnings, this was still a valuable piece of jewelry.

"It's beautiful, but I can't take this from you," Jason said, glancing at his aunt.

"Nonsense," she replied, waving him off. "You can and you will. You're the one supplying this free apartment, and the only reason I even still have this necklace is... is because you stopped those teenagers." She hesitated slightly at this last part, choosing her words carefully as she watched Jason.

Angie snapped the case shut and placed it in his hand firmly. "Besides, I have a feeling this isn't some stupid fling. There's just something about that girl..."

"You haven't even met her," Jason protested, shaking his head.

"I don't need to!" Angie said with a smile. "It's just a feeling."

Jason wisely decided not to put up a fight about the necklace. Angie could be pretty determined when she set her mind to it, and she had that look in her eye. Besides, it was also a great idea – one he wished he had thought of first.

His aunt glanced at the Core on her wrist, noting the time. "Anyway, you need to get moving. It's almost seven. You should be upstairs waiting when she gets here. Girls like a punctual man, trust me."

Jason nodded, feeling a little nervous again. Even after kissing Riley that afternoon, he still felt nervous. This was technically his first date – not just with Riley, but ever. And he was going to be attending the party with *Riley*. He couldn't help but pinch himself a little as he started toward the door to the apartment, just to check that he wasn't dreaming or this was some sort of simulation. Only a few weeks ago, he never would have imagined that he would be living at the headquarters for his favorite video game and going to an upscale party with the girl of his dreams.

You know, putting aside the terrible relationship with my parents, the fact that George is using me as bait this evening to draw out whoever is leaking information, and how I'm hiding both my relationship with Alfred and how Claire admitted that she blew the whistle to Gloria. And that's ignoring the man who is threatening my city and how the native undead are evolving out of control. So, yeah, things are just going splendidly.

He shook his head. None of that mattered right now. All he could think about was spending time with Riley. He could deal with those problems later.

As Jason was about to leave, he glanced back over his shoulder at his aunt, who now stood in the mouth of the entry hallway. "Thank you, Angie," he said quietly, meeting his aunt's gaze.

“Not a problem,” Angie replied with a smile. “Try to have some fun tonight.”

As Jason stepped out of the apartment, Angie’s smile faltered. In the background, she could hear the TV blaring, a reporter providing an update on the ongoing CPSC hearing. “Try to enjoy it while it lasts,” she murmured to herself, a concerned expression lingering on her face. “You sure deserve a night of fun.”

* * *

Jason stood in the lobby of Cerillion Entertainment, sparkling marble adorning the floors and twenty-foot columns intermittently breaking up the massive space. He fidgeted nervously as his hand cradled the case in his pocket. Several of the party’s attendees had passed him while he waited for Riley, all of whom sported luxurious suits and gowns. They spoke quietly as they made their ways to the bank of elevators at the back of the lobby, the occasional couple sparing a curious glance at Jason where he lingered by a column.

He couldn’t help but notice what he could only assume were thousands of dollars’ worth of jewelry accentuating each woman’s outfit. Despite his ulterior motive for the party, George had been clear that this event was primarily for wealthy and influential investors and business partners. It made him think that the modest necklace in his pocket wasn’t going to be nearly enough. With her family’s wealth, would Riley genuinely like it, or would she just think it was tacky?

Jason froze as his eyes shifted back to the front doors. “Oh, wow,” he murmured.

Riley had appeared in the entrance, looking around the lobby as she searched for someone – searched for him. She wore a floor-length blue gown, the column of chiffon hugging her athletic frame. The back of the dress was open to the waist and curved just low enough in the front to hold Jason’s attention. Her long blonde hair had been carefully shaped to show off the graceful curve of her neck. The way the light hit her hair seemed to make it glow, although he might have been a little biased.

It took Jason a moment for his brain to reset. Riley looked amazing.

Her eyes finally found his, and a small, shy smile crept across Riley’s face. He could feel his heart skip a beat and he swallowed against the nervous lump that had formed in his throat.

“Y-you look beautiful,” Jason said as she approached.

“Thank you,” Riley replied demurely. Her hesitation was even

more striking given her normally confident demeanor in-game and spoke volumes about how she felt about the evening. This was the same girl he had fought beside for weeks inside AO. For some reason, her acting slightly shy helped settle Jason's nerves.

"I actually have something for you," he offered, pulling the case from his pocket. "I wanted to make this evening special – even though I know it was sort of last minute. It's not much, but I hope you like it."

"Really?" she asked in surprise. "You didn't have to..." She trailed off as he opened the case and showed her the necklace. "Oh, it's a rose," she said, a brilliant, happy smile curving her lips. If he hadn't already had a crush on her for years, that smile alone would have done him in.

Riley looked up at him. "It's lovely. And I couldn't find anything that I felt matched the dress anyway." Then a mischievous grin crossed her face. "Will you help me put it on?" She turned to offer her back to him, tugging her hair to the side.

"S-sure," Jason replied quickly. He gulped slightly, fumbling with the catch on the necklace as he encircled her neck with the chain. Her skin felt warm and smooth to his touch, and he could smell the faint hint of flowers that always seemed to accompany Riley.

As he finished, Riley twirled back to face him. "What do you think?" she asked, fiddling with the pendant.

Jason was already floored by her appearance, but he had to admit that the necklace paired well with her gown. He owed Angie for her quick thinking – yet again. "You look fantastic," he said finally, realizing that he hadn't responded to her question. He had simply been staring at her.

She chuckled slightly. "Great. You want to head upstairs?"

"Uh, yeah," he offered not-so-eloquently. Riley took his arm, and he reveled in the sensation. Not for the first time, he was starting to question if this was real and wonder what was going to go wrong. Given his track record, he was ready for anything. The elevator might explode. The company would probably fire him this evening. Yet, he had trouble caring about any of that.

The pair made their way to the elevators and managed to snatch one to themselves, the initial crowd having largely filtered upstairs already. Riley made no move to release Jason's arm, and he certainly didn't move away. After a few seconds of silence, she glanced at Jason beside her. "Sorry, I was running a little late. Caleb called just as I was about to head out the door, and then my mom and dad needed to fuss over me for a few minutes."

Jason winced slightly. She was clearly on a date with him, and the other guy was her cousin. His rational brain knew that, but Caleb was still good-looking, and they had been spending a lot of time

together. “So, um, what have you two been up to? It seems like you’ve been hanging out a lot.”

Riley sighed, rolling her eyes. “Caleb’s boyfriend broke up with him a few days ago. They were living together here in the city, but the boyfriend’s name was on the lease. The asshole basically threw Caleb out. So, he’s been scrambling to find a place to stay. He stayed with us for a few days, and I’ve been going with him to look at apartments – and sort of acting as his shoulder to cry on. We were actually checking out a few places the first day of the hearing, which is why he came with me.”

She sighed. “I love him, but he’s been a little clingy,” she offered, pinching her fingers together to emphasize her point.

“Oh,” Jason replied, his mind focused solely on the implication of Caleb having a boyfriend. “So, he’s uh...”

Riley glanced at him, amusement creeping across her face. “Gay? Yeah.” Her smile widened further. “You weren’t *jealous*, were you?” She nudged him slightly with her arm. “You seemed a little upset in-game earlier.”

“I wasn’t jealous,” Jason defended himself a little too quickly. He couldn’t quite meet her gaze, and he knew his cheeks were betraying him by flushing hotly. Why did his stupid body have to do this to him? Why did people even have the ability to blush?

He felt Riley’s fingers against his cheek, and she drew his gaze to hers. Before he could react, she leaned forward and pressed her lips to his, and he instantly forgot what he was thinking about. As she drew away, she met his eyes, looking up at him slightly from her shorter height.

“Uh huh. Well, you don’t need to worry,” she said firmly. Then she cocked her head slightly. “*Although*, the idea of dating a guy that wants to go shopping with me does sound kind of appealing.” She spared a mischievous grin at him at this last statement.

He opened his mouth to respond but was interrupted by a ding – signaling that they had reached their floor. The doors to the elevators slid open, and the pair stepped out. They froze in surprise as they took in the party.

“Oh, wow,” Jason murmured. His reaction was echoed by Riley’s gasp.

The elevator opened onto a rooftop terrace. The entire top of the Cerillion Entertainment building was used to house a pool and spa area, which Jason really hadn’t had much time or inclination to investigate while he had been staying there. However, the area had been converted for the event. Gone were the pool chairs and unnecessary equipment. Small cocktail tables now dotted the area, and the nearby tiered pools glowed with multi-colored fluorescent

light.

However, what captured Jason and Riley's attention was the ten-foot holograms projected next to the exit from the elevators. The images floated above a series of small black pedestals. An eerily familiar hooded character greeted them on the right. His face was shrouded in darkness, and he clutched a staff in one hand as his other pulsed with dark energy.

As they watched, tendrils of mana snaked from the figure's hand and raced through the air around the gathering, floating above the heads of the guests. Slightly transparent zombies seemed to materialize from thin air, pulling themselves from the ground around the terrace with torturous slowness.

It took Jason a moment to notice the drones that hovered in the air, projecting the images down onto the terrace. They must be responsible for the holograms. He could only wonder if they were a new prototype. It was one thing to project a stationary image, but to dynamically choose empty spots around the party to project the zombies was impressive. The undead shifted and moved naturally, avoiding the guests. He sensed Robert's hand in this.

The rest of the guests seemed unperturbed by this scene – as though it were completely normal. “Uh, so I guess that's you?” Riley asked, pointing at the dark figure with a skeptical look on her face. “This is really weird.”

Jason couldn't help but agree, his mouth hanging open. “At least my face isn't visible,” he muttered. Not that this would likely help much since his pictures had been appearing on a bunch of news channels all week.

As he looked around the party, Jason noticed George standing a dozen or so feet away talking with a small group. Their eyes met briefly, and the CEO lifted his drink, gesturing subtly at the drones in the air. Jason immediately recalled George's purpose in inviting him to this party, one he hadn't shared with Riley – not wanting to spoil their date. He also suspected that the drones might serve a secondary purpose, possibly recording his every movement in the hope of identifying the leak.

He felt a flash of guilt. Jason already knew that their whistleblower was Claire. The only question was whether Claire would follow through with her testimony next week or whether he and Alfred had only made the problem worse. He still wasn't certain whether he was doing the right thing by hiding this information from George.

With a hollow feeling gnawing at his stomach, Jason could feel his problems settling on his shoulders again, weighing him down and making him feel slightly suffocated. He tugged at his tie, the cloth

suddenly feeling quite constricting. Maybe this might not have been the best idea for a first date.

Riley noticed his sudden change in mood, and she nudged him. “Hey, so I think you owe me a drink. I seem to recall that I kicked your ass during that last fight.”

He looked at her in surprise. “I think I did pretty well,” he retorted. “If you hadn’t been distracting me, I would have won! I did manage to trip and grapple you.”

“Uh huh, says the guy who had a dagger stuck in his arm for most of the fight,” Riley replied, rolling her eyes playfully as she pulled him toward a nearby bar. “Plus, I had you dead to rights there at the end and I’m not sure you even landed a solid hit.”

“I make it a habit not to hit pretty girls,” he quipped good-naturedly.

The pair headed off toward the bar, bickering about who had won that last fight and whether a rematch was in order. Riley had accomplished her goal. Jason could feel his nervousness melting away – both at attending the party with Riley and the CPSC hearing that was still looming over his head. He knew what she had done by shifting the subject, but he didn’t care. Tonight, he could use a distraction.

* * *

Sometime later, the couple found themselves sipping decidedly non-alcoholic beverages at one of the small cocktail tables that dotted the terrace. Apparently, the bartender had been instructed not to serve Jason, which made it impossible to score something a little stronger. After coming up empty-handed, they had made the rounds of the terrace, admiring the view, and mingling with a few guests. However, they had spent the majority of the time alone, only the occasional employee or guest recognizing Jason and approaching them.

Jason was just beginning to finally relax when he saw Claire break from the crowd and head their way.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

“Good evening, Jason,” the older woman said as she approached, adjusting her glasses with one hand. Jason noted that she looked anxious and she kept glancing at the other guests around them.

“Hello,” Jason replied.

Claire’s attention settled on Riley beside him. “Who’s your friend? I’m not sure we’ve met.”

“Uh, this is Riley,” Jason offered. “Riley, this is Claire. She

basically runs the group that administers the game.”

“A pleasure,” Riley said, offering her hand.

“Riley?” Claire echoed as she greeted Jason’s date. “That sounds familiar. Ahh, you must be the same girl that has been working with Jason in-game. Your reputation precedes you. I have to say that I’m a fan.”

“Me too. Riley has definitely pulled my ass out of the fire a time or two,” Jason acknowledged, earning him a smirk from Riley.

As they finished their introductions, Claire returned her attention to Jason, although she seemed uncertain how to continue. “I may need to talk to you later regarding the game and our previous conversation...” she said hesitantly.

“No problem,” he interjected quickly and looked pointedly at the drones that hovered above them. He suspected that they would be able to capture audio even at this distance. “Although, maybe this could wait until tomorrow. I know we need to talk about my *streaming contract*, but we were sort of hoping to avoid work this evening.” He watched Claire, praying that she would pick up on the subtext of what he was saying.

The woman’s eyes flickered to the drones and then back to Jason, a frown creasing her lips. “Hmm,” she murmured and then seemed to shake herself. “Yes, of course, you’re right,” she added as she noticed Riley staring at her uncertainly. Claire spared Riley a lopsided smile. “My apologies. I have trouble turning off ‘work mode.’ This is primarily an investor gala, so I’m still thinking about business.”

Claire turned back to Jason. “We’ll catch up another time then. You two have a wonderful evening.”

“Sounds good,” Jason said, hoping that this exchange had been convincing. After that, Claire excused herself and blended back into the party.

“What was that?” Riley whispered, leaning closer to Jason. “That was really awkward.”

Jason shook his head. “That’s just Claire,” he answered carefully, still conscious of the fact that they were being recorded. “She’s a bit of a workaholic.”

He quickly decided he needed to change the subject. “Anyway, why don’t we talk about the challenge? I think I have an idea for how we should tackle it next time...”

Riley still looked skeptical, but she didn’t press the issue, and the pair immediately launched into an impromptu strategy session. Through it all, a small part of Jason’s mind was still fixated on the encounter with Claire. What had she been about to say? Had she made a decision? Would she testify against Alfred? In any event, he was going to have to wait to find out.

And hope that George didn't read too much into their brief encounter.

Chapter 34 - Tense

Alex's gaze panned across the rooftop terrace from his perch on one of its many elevated sitting areas. Spectral magic drifted above the crowd, a product of the drones that buzzed silently in the night air. His eyes came to a stop on the nearby elevators, Jason's cloaked form looming over the guests as they trickled into the event. Of course, his father had decided to honor his rival instead of Alex. Had he not conquered a city as well? Wouldn't his angelic wings have been similarly impressive?

He knew that the explanation for his opponent's popularity was due in part to Jason's role in the CPSC hearing. He was quickly becoming a lightning rod for both sides in the conflict. In many ways, Alex had caused that problem – enlisting those two teenagers to break into Jason's home. That had been a mistake. One that had led his father to invite Jason into the Cerillion Entertainment Headquarters building and pushed Jason further into the spotlight. If he hadn't made that move, would it be Alex's image adorning the rooftop terrace?

He sighed heavily. His eyes were still searching the crowd, discreetly looking for someone – an errant flash of crimson among the party-goers. He knew that he wasn't really upset about Jason, but his would-be nemesis was something easy and tangible to grasp onto. Their rivalry was ingrained at this point, the emotional channels well-worn and easy to navigate. The voice in the back of his head whispered to him, taunting and insidious, urging him to think about Jason to avoid the more painful thoughts lingering in the back of his mind – the reason he kept looking for *her*.

"Penny for your thoughts?" a familiar voice spoke from behind him. He whirled to find Evelyn standing there, wearing a rose-red cocktail dress that perfectly accentuated her curves. "Although, I suppose we could both afford more than a penny," she added with a smirk.

Alex eyed her in surprise, vainly trying to control his expression. "I was actually just admiring the view," he said, trying to dissemble. He didn't want her to know that he had been hoping she would take him up on his invitation. He was having trouble admitting that to himself.

Evelyn came to stand beside him, her hands resting on the railing. Her gaze followed his to the images of Jason that lingered about the party. "It seems your father is rather taken with this Jason

character,” she observed, watching Alex’s reaction.

“He is just another weapon in my father’s arsenal,” Alex retorted, unable to keep the bitterness from his voice. “He *needs* Jason right now. However, I suspect he will treat him like any other tool at some point, disposing of him when he’s no longer useful.”

“That’s not very high praise of your father,” Evelyn observed, her lips pursed in thought.

Alex shrugged. “I suspect I don’t have to explain to you that this isn’t a matter of personal sentiment. What is the expression? All is fair in love and war? They should have added *business* to that list.”

He tried to shift the subject away from Jason and his father – not wanting to poke at those mental sores. “So, what made you decide to come? You seemed rather ambivalent when I offered the idea.”

It was Evelyn’s turn to shrug, but he didn’t miss the way she glanced at him furtively before she replied. “As you said, it was an opportunity to network and to get to know my new business partner better.” She touched his arm gently at this last statement, her fingers lingering for only a moment.

Alex immediately wished she would do it again but then hated himself for thinking that almost just as quickly. Why did he want this woman’s approval and affection so badly? What was different about her? He fiddled with the case in his pocket, suddenly feeling uncertain. He hadn’t known whether Evelyn would attend, but he had still prepared this gift for her – or at least he had paid someone to make it for him.

“I actually have something for you,” he offered hesitantly, hating the weakness he detected in his own voice. “I suppose you could consider it a token for taking a risk with my fledgling kingdom.” As he finished speaking, he pulled out the case and handed it to Evelyn.

Her eyes lit up in amusement, the corners of her mouth curving upward almost imperceptibly. “Ahh, well, I never say no to presents.”

She proceeded to open the case, and a frown fluttered across her face, her lips pinched together as she observed the contents. Alex wasn’t certain what reaction he had been expecting, but Evelyn didn’t exactly seem pleased.

“I thought I would recreate one of the badges for your new guild. Between our first encounter at that gala and your guild emblem, you seemed to have a fondness for daisies,” Alex explained quickly, trying his best not to sound worried.

Evelyn lifted the insignia out of the box, the small wooden square tailored to look like an exact replica of her guild badge. “I-I...” she began but trailed off, her brow furrowed as she stared down at the insignia.

“My apologies if this was off base,” Alex offered tentatively. He was experiencing a strange sinking feeling in his stomach and began to wonder if he had eaten something that had made him sick.

Evelyn seemed to remember that Alex was watching her, and she glanced up quickly, a grateful and somewhat confused expression on her face. “No, not at all. Actually, this is very... sweet,” she murmured, looking down at the insignia again. “Thank you.”

“Think nothing of it,” Alex replied.

Evelyn coughed delicately to clear her throat. “Anyway, this reminds me that we are nearly ready to launch our expedition,” she said, clearly trying to shift the subject away from the gift. Alex noticed that she discreetly placed it in her purse. “Our spies informed me that the Twilight Throne’s forces have made their way south and east as we predicted.”

“Good,” Alex said with a nod, turning his gaze back to the terrace. He couldn’t seem to stop thinking about Evelyn’s reaction to that stupid trinket. Had he misjudged the situation? “Then I suppose we can prepare our troops and strike the villages along the western border soon. Hopefully, we can hit them too hard and fast for them to launch a counterattack.”

“That would be the plan,” Evelyn replied with a grin, regaining some of her composure. Her eyes had shifted to the crowd below them. “Although, speaking of the devil himself...”

Alex followed her gaze and found himself looking at Jason – the real Jason – standing beside a small cocktail table. He appeared to be speaking with a woman dressed in a blue dress, her back to Alex. He could feel the presence in the back of his mind stir restlessly at the sight. It was bad enough that his father had made Jason’s in-game image the focal point of the party, but he had also invited the help? That was just galling.

Evelyn placed a hand on Alex’s arm, startling him. “Perhaps you should go and try to tease out some information? You might learn something by speaking with Jason.”

“Certainly,” Alex replied through gritted teeth. He felt like this might be the ultimate test of his ability to maintain his composure. While he might hate his rival, this wasn’t the place to make a scene. He offered an arm to Evelyn. “Would you care to accompany me? You are my *accomplice*, after all.”

A genuine smile graced her lips. Her Core let out a soft chime, and she glanced down at the device on her wrist, her expression slipping just briefly. Alex noted a hint of concern in her eyes as she met his gaze again. “Perhaps in just a moment. I need to visit the lady’s room first.”

She hesitated slightly, looking a tad awkward. “Actually, I have

an odd request. Is there any way I could visit a restroom on another level? The line up here was rather long when I passed by a moment ago.”

Alex tilted his head slightly. If he helped her, Evelyn could rejoin him more quickly. That was to his advantage in talking to Jason since he had found her to be incredibly perceptive. Or, at least, that’s what he told himself.

“Certainly,” he replied, tugging his Core from his wrist. “You will need this to access the floor below us. The ladies’ room is down the hall and to the left as you exit the elevator.”

“Thank you,” Evelyn said, snatching the Core from his hand. As she moved to leave, she hesitated once more, stopping and turning to Alex. Before he could react, she stepped forward quickly and placed a kiss on his cheek. “And thank you again for the insignia,” she said quietly, not quite meeting his gaze. “It was a sweet thought.”

With that, Evelyn disappeared down the stairs and into the crowd. Alex stood there for a long moment, his fingertips just barely touching his cheek. He could still smell her perfume and feel the hint of her kiss lingering on his skin. For some reason, the entire exchange had unsettled him and made him feel uncomfortably warm. He had never experienced that sensation before, and he couldn’t decide whether he enjoyed it or not.

Feeling somewhat flustered, Alex’s gaze returned to Jason, and he tried to settle his thoughts. He wasn’t certain what had just happened in his exchange with Evelyn, but he knew Jason. He understood him. That was something he could control. A grim smile drifted across his face. He was looking forward to speaking with his rival again.

* * *

“Hey, are you listening to me?” Riley asked, waving a hand in Jason’s face.

His eyes were fixed on a familiar blond-haired individual approaching through the crowd. “Uh, yeah,” he said. “I’m not sure how to sugar coat this, so here it goes... Alex is heading this way.”

“Shit, what?” Riley asked, starting to turn.

He grabbed her hand to stop her for a moment. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I should have warned you that he might be here. It’s his father’s company, after all. If you want to leave, I can deal with him.”

Riley looked back at him, anger flaring in her eyes and her expression hardening. This was the Riley he knew – the Fury. “Fuck

that," she hissed. "I'm not giving him the pleasure of seeing me run away."

"Fair enough. Just try not to make a scene," he urged her. "I still need this job. I'm not saying you should be nice to him. Maybe just don't try to shank him with a wine glass."

"I'll try, but I'm not making any promises," she growled, and he noticed her hand tighten around the stem of her glass.

"Well, what do we have here?" Alex said as he neared them. "I didn't realize that my father was inviting the help this evening," he sneered at Jason. Riley's back was still to him. As she turned, Alex seemed to do a double take, his eyes widening slightly – although he recovered quickly. His cruel smile widened further.

"Ahh, and I see you brought Riley," he added, gesturing at her. Alex leaned toward Jason conspiratorially. "Be careful with this one. I hear she gets around."

Riley wrapped her arm around Jason's waist and smiled, the expression barely veiling the intense hatred in her eyes. "I do have a bit of experience," she replied without wavering. "That's how I can say confidently that I upgraded to something much *bigger* and better."

Alex's sneer faltered at her implied insult. "What do you want, Alex?" Jason asked finally, hoping to make this a quick encounter. "We were having a nice evening, and we don't want to cause a scene here."

As the blond-haired man met his gaze, Jason resisted the urge to shudder. There was always something so lifeless and cold about Alex's eyes. "Trust me when I say that I understand the importance of appearances. Despite our history, I will not do anything to undermine my family's company. For now, you are useful," he spat. "For now."

Then Alex's mask reappeared, a smile curling his lips and his eyes softening slightly. "Besides, I just wanted to check in on my in-game neighbor. Perhaps it's time to mend bridges."

"It will be a cold day in hell before we make a deal with you," Riley said bluntly. "Or should we believe someone else staged undead corpses in your city and in Vaerwald? And I'm sure you know nothing about the attacks on one of our outlying villages known for smuggling undead slaves?"

"That truly was unfortunate. The *brigands* these days are certainly becoming more aggressive," Alex replied, his smile widening as he blatantly ignored Riley's accusation. "It was a real shame that that village was unprotected and so far away from your little city. That must make it difficult to deal with these sorts of attacks."

"That won't be a problem much longer," Jason replied, recalling the enhanced fortifications he had built in Fastu. "I suspect anyone who tries that move again will be in for a surprise." He saw a

glimmer of doubt flash across Alex's face.

Is he planning something? Jason wondered suddenly.

"I don't doubt that," Alex replied with dry sarcasm. "Especially with the rumors that there is some sort of terrorist group plaguing your city. This is on top of your problem recruiting new players, right? I can only guess that your forces are spread quite thin right now."

He seems to know a lot about the situation in the Twilight Throne, Jason thought. *That probably isn't a good sign.* Could Alex be in league with Thorn? Or somehow responsible for the growing strength of the native undead outside the city?

"I think we will manage. It took very little to defeat your army the first time," Jason retorted coldly. "How many of your troops did I kill by myself?"

"Jason!" Riley reprimanded him, swatting his shoulder. "You're also forgetting the explosive finale!"

"Ahh, I'm sorry. You're right. Alex here did go out with a bang, didn't he?"

Alex grimaced, covering his reaction with a forced laugh. "I think you might find things different now," he said with feigned amusement. "Some of us have been busy since our last engagement."

"I agree," Jason replied without skipping a beat. "A lot has changed since then."

Alex leaned forward, lowering his voice. "I am curious, however," he said. "Our friendly *banter* aside. Have you heard of these gates?"

Jason didn't give away his surprise. Had Alex's goddess mentioned the gates to him? They had only discovered the mention of the portals from Thorn. Perhaps he should consider talking to the Old Man about a possible violation of the covenants.

"I'm not sure what you mean," Jason answered, feigning confusion. He glanced at Riley. "Maybe he's going mad. He always has been a little unstable."

This seemed to touch a nerve with Alex, and he took a threatening step forward. Jason found that he didn't find his former bully that intimidating any longer and he rose to the challenge, his hands clenching into fists. He instinctively adjusted his weight – preparing to defend himself. His newfound muscles shifted beneath his skin as he recalled the hours spent in combat training in-game. Jason silently thanked Alfred for his foresight.

"Think carefully," Jason murmured quietly, his voice threatening. "There are dozens of witnesses here, and you are threatening someone who has *killed* two people. Do you think I couldn't take you down right here?"

Alex glared at him from only a foot or two away, his eyes

having gone lifeless again. “I think you overestimate yourself,” Alex said grimly. “You overstep, and you don’t realize it. Deep down, you are the same weak boy who used to cower away from me and the girl beside you is nothing more than my old plaything.”

Jason’s gaze didn’t waver. “Those were different people. You are looking at the fucking Regent of a city and his right hand now. Don’t misunderstand me, Alex. I won’t make a scene here. But if I see you in-game, I will fucking kill you with my own hands – without hesitation.”

“If I don’t beat him to it,” Riley said from beside him. “You would do well not to underestimate us again.”

The tension hovered in the air, Alex looking between the two of them. Several of the guests had noticed the confrontation and had begun murmuring among themselves. Both Alex and Jason were easy to recognize. Alex caught sight of security drifting through the crowd, the black-uniformed men making a beeline for their position. His father was also watching from across the room, and he didn’t look amused.

A voice suddenly filled the air, projected from the drones that hovered over the terrace. “To all our guests, thank you for attending our event this evening. We have prepared a small display to show our gratitude. Please make your way to the southern edge of the terrace.”

The voice seemed to disarm the conflict and Jason couldn’t help but wonder if someone had decided to make the announcement early. Alex slowly backed down, withdrawing a step.

“Well then, I think we understand each other perfectly,” Alex said, still watching Jason and Riley with those dead eyes – his mask gone. Without warning, he turned and started to walk away, the security hesitating as they saw the potential conflict unwind. Alex paused and glanced back over his shoulder. “One word of warning, however. The two of you might have just grown into power, but I’ve lived with it my entire life. Don’t think for a moment that either of you have seen the full extent of my abilities.”

With that final comment, Alex stormed off.

“I hate him,” Riley said quietly. She was still visibly tense – her fists clenched tightly as she watched Alex disappear. Around them, the guests were starting to drift toward the southern edge of the terrace, chatting amiably and carrying their glasses.

Jason grabbed her hand, uncurling her fists. “I know. He’s a sadistic asshole, but let’s not let him ruin our evening. I’m here with *you*. I could weather anything,” he offered with a small smile, trying to regain their previous good humor.

Riley looked up at him, slowly beginning to relax. “You really can be sweet sometimes – especially for a guy that plays with corpses

all day.”

Jason nodded. “Although, the corpses *are* easier. They don’t talk back and challenge me quite so much. Or stab me.”

Riley punched him in the shoulder. “Or punch me...” he added. This earned him a laugh as they joined the group of party-goers trickling southward.

As they reached the railing, the voice spoke up again. “We’re going to be giving a little re-enactment from our company’s immensely popular new game, Awaken Online. Some of you might recognize this next sequence.”

The drones buzzed through the air, barely visible as they took up positions along the terrace. Then, without warning, a massive sapphire dragon began to materialize from thin air, its body knitting itself together from small tendrils of blue energy. Soon, its long serpentine neck curled and coiled through the air as gusts of icy wind shot from its nostrils and danced among the crowd on the terrace.

“Oh wow,” Riley murmured. “They’re going to recreate the fight in the Sea’s Edge.”

A demon soon appeared in the night sky, its body composed of intertwining layers of ivory bone and its thin arms ending in scythe-like claws. Dark energy rippled across its body as it flexed its arms and legs experimentally, mimicking the actions the creature had made in-game when Jason had first summoned it. He watched the monster sadly, knowing that Rex’s consciousness didn’t linger inside this version of the demon. It was just a pale imitation of what he had created in-game. Not that he suspected that the crowd would appreciate those nuances.

As the two creatures began to share blows and tumble across the night sky to the gasps of the onlookers, Jason watched Riley. Traces of sadness and anger still lingered on her face as she watched the aerial display, evidence of their encounter with Alex. Without thinking, he took her hand. She pulled her gaze away from the battle to meet his, questioning. He was trying hard to think of something he could say that would convey his feelings – that would make her forget Alex.

Yet no inspired statement came to him.

Instead, he simply leaned down, placed his hand behind her head, and turned her toward him. He kissed her then, trying to put into action what he couldn’t find the words to say. As she pulled away, he thought he might have been successful. Her eyes sparkled as she looked up at him, the occasional flash of energy and ice reflected in their surface.

They might have enemies. He might have a mountain of problems.

But at least they had each other now.

Chapter 35 - Ingenious

When Jason logged into AO the next day, he had a grin on his face despite the gloomy trappings of the second challenge room. He felt happier than he had in a long time. He still faced problems in both the real world and the game; they hadn't gone away just because he and Riley had resolved their issues. But they felt more manageable now, and he didn't feel like he was suffocating under the mountain of shit that the universe always seemed to shovel his way.

That was, until a blue notification flashed in his vision, demanding his attention and obscuring his view of the challenge room beneath the dark keep.

System Notice

Hello player! Welcome back to the world of Awaken Online. While our servers were temporarily offline, we made a few changes to the game world and character balance. A complete change log can be found by tapping [here](#) or by visiting our [official forums](#).

Since a large number of changes were made to the game world and to various classes and skills – only some of which may apply to your avatar or the zone you are currently located in – we have dynamically tailored the patch log to provide a summary of the changes that may affect you directly.

- The max level of your summoned creatures can no longer be higher than your current character level.
- The level of skeletons created using *Custom Skeleton* has now been adjusted to $Willpower/15$ at Beginner Level 1, and each level of *Custom Skeleton* decreases the divisor by .5 to a floor of 1. Your current skill level is Intermediate Level 7 and your current *Willpower* ratio is $Willpower/7.0$, meaning that the max level of your skeletons is now level 128 (down from level 181).
- Creatures summoned using *Specialized Zombie* retain the original creature's level during life, but that can no longer be higher than your character level (down from the

previous level cap of 387). We're sure you never considered trying to revive a dead world boss... but we're going to go ahead and cut off that issue right now.

- Creatures summoned using *Custom Skeleton* and *Specialized Zombie* now have a default mana reserve cost of 100 per creature. This reserve cost will increase or decrease relative to the size and power of the summoned creature. We have received a number of complaints about your... err, *prolific* summoning.

Happy hunting!

And thanks for playing Awaken Online!

"Shit," Jason murmured.

He could only stare at the floating notification in shock. He had completely forgotten the patch notification he had seen just before Rex had trapped him and Riley in the challenge room – he had been a bit distracted at the time. Alfred had also clearly mentioned that changes to his class were incoming a few days ago, but the comment had gotten lost in the shuffle. Although, he certainly remembered now.

Alfred had cut deep. The average level of his skeletons had dropped from level 181 to level 128, meaning that they had lost 75 levels worth of stat points. Now, even his zombies were limited to his own level. Although, realistically, he wasn't certain how he could find or kill something over level 380. The summoned dragon in the Sea's Edge had probably been the closest thing they had found, but there hadn't been much left by the time Frank had gotten done with it. His barbarian friend apparently didn't much care for hallucinogenic unicorns. What little had remained had disintegrated shortly afterward – whatever spell that had held the creature together dissipating.

Although summoning an undead dragon would have been awesome, he thought wistfully.

And then there was the mana reserve cost of his summoned creatures. His current Control Limit was 111 and he had a total of 13,675 mana. Assuming he only summoned normal-sized creatures up to his Control Limit, that meant his mana reserve cost would be 11,100, leaving him with a measly 2,575 mana. And that assumed that each minion only cost 100 mana. The prompt had indicated that

this might not be the case. Either way, since his mana was now both his health and his means to cast spells, this would effectively cripple his ability to fight in melee, turning him into some sort of summoner-glass cannon. For example, he'd be able to channel *Soul Slash* for a grand total of five seconds before he killed himself.

As he analyzed the changes, Jason came to a sudden realization regarding Alfred's intent. The AI was essentially telling him he couldn't both summon an army and be a melee powerhouse. He had to pick one depending on the situation. Or go take a more hybrid route by intentionally summoning fewer creatures at the cost of a corresponding amount of mana. The flip side was that this meant he hadn't wasted the points in *Willpower*. The stat dramatically increased his now-single-resource pool and the level scaling on *Custom Skeleton* now made it even more useful than simply increasing his Control Limit. He could grudgingly admit that this was probably fair, but damn was it depressing.

Alfred had hit him with the nerf hammer hard.

Jason swiped away the notification, his gaze focusing on the oppressive darkness that filled the room as he tried to process the full consequences of these changes. They meant that his city and his troops were even more important now. He could still field a small army, but his minions would be much weaker unless he could find suitable corpses instead of using bones.

He would also be even more vulnerable while summoning a large number of creatures – which meant Riley and Frank would need to keep him alive. Either that, or he would have to decide to engage in melee, in which case he would have to lean on his city's regular forces and any players they could recruit to make up for the loss of numbers.

His gaze shifted to the doorway leading back to the first challenge room and the training area beyond it. His teammates and the Kin had just become even more important – either to keep him alive or to back him up in a fight. Which meant that he needed to focus on improving his city if he was to get stronger.

They still needed to stop Thorn, of course, which meant completing the challenges. But it would likely be a few hours until Riley logged in and they could attempt the second challenge room again. She had mentioned the night before that she needed to tackle a few things in the real world. In the meantime, he could focus on the city. The primary question was how best to spend his limited time and resources.

Even if they managed to defeat the Order, Jason needed to fortify the Twilight Throne's defenses and attract new players and citizens to compensate for his weaknesses going forward. And, to do that, they needed *money*. It all came back to money. This patch made

his decision to conquer the outlying villages and invest in Eliza's potion manufacturing operation even more critical. He abruptly decided that his first stop should be the mana well to check on its progress and then he needed to talk to Eliza about the idea that Angie had inadvertently given him. Maybe they could come up with a way to produce the health potions more quickly.

Even as he decided on a plan of action, Jason started walking. He quickly found himself standing beside the mana well. Without further ado, he sunk his hand into the chill liquid resting in the bowl before him.

Mana Well Console: Status

Well Level: 5 (7% to level 6)

Current Spirit Charges: 51/100

Spirit Charge Income: +3 every two days (average).

Mana Well Console: Notice

Congratulations! Your city's mana well has advanced to level 5. You have now unlocked the ability to access the mana well from any point within the Twilight Throne. A new menu option should be available on your system UI.

New buildings and abilities are now available under "Build Options" and "Miracles."

Well, at least that's some good news, Jason thought wryly as he reviewed the second notification.

Being able to access the well without entering the keep would be convenient. He idly wondered if Pint was capable of leveling and upgrading his abilities. Although, Jason was reluctant to experiment since that would involve actually talking to the irritating creature. He shuddered at the thought. For now, he could probably make do with visiting the keep and shouting until the gray imp showed up.

Jason's gaze shifted back to the status screen. Frank had been

busy, and the well had leveled three times since Jason had summoned his first Dark Spire in Fastu. However, the Spirit Charge generation had leveled off and become a little erratic. Jason assumed that this might be a result of the native undead killing the residents of the various villages before Frank and Vera arrived. Only kills made by his citizens seemed to increase the Spirit Charges, although the ambient income had gone up on average as the well improved in level. Perhaps it was becoming more efficient at gathering mana.

Skimming down the list of menu options floating in front of him, Jason brought up the region map. This option had opened up after summoning the first Dark Spire. Immediately, a map was projected above the well, showing the Twilight Throne in its center and a spider web of villages that spread around the central city in a roughly circular pattern. A small spire icon hovered over each town, evidence that Jason had continued to summon a Dark Spire each time Frank and Vera conquered a town. He had even managed to build one of the towers in Peccavi, which made communication with William much easier. He didn't have enough resources to upgrade every town's defenses as he had done in Fastu, but he had been careful to upgrade the villages on their western border since they faced Alexion's kingdom.

He could still remember his encounter with Alex at the Cerillion Entertainment event. His nemesis seemed to have a disconcerting amount of information about the state of the Twilight Throne, and he couldn't help but wonder if Alexion might be plotting something – or whether he might have spies planted inside the city.

Shaking his head, Jason tapped on the icon for Peccavi, William's town to the north. A small chat console appeared, and he noticed that no messages were waiting for him. He had discovered that the Dark Spires – when upgraded – acted as a communication relay and allowed NPCs to leave messages for his later review. Now that he could access the well console throughout the city, he might be able to respond immediately if a crisis occurred.

Jason sighed. He knew he was procrastinating.

His eyes hovered over "Build Options" on the menu list. Now was the moment of truth. The notice had mentioned new structures, and he needed to determine if his tentative plan would work. Jason flipped back through the menus and pulled up the list of structures he could build, skimming down the list quickly. A small smile graced his lips as he saw the option he was looking for, and he tapped it.

Mana Well Console: Build Options

Structure: Custom Building

Description: Now that the city's mana well has advanced in power, you are capable of creating unique structures empowered by dark mana. These structures are limited by the nature of the mana used and by your available resources. For example, you will never be able to create a traditional laser turret. Sorry! Although, some sort of death ray might not be entirely out of the question...

The cost of the custom structure will depend on its size and complexity. Some buildings may also incur a recurring Spirit Charge cost to maintain the structure and keep it operational – which will reduce your mana well's daily Spirit Charge income. A screen detailing the full cost of the structure will be presented after you have finalized your design.

Cost: Variable fixed and/or recurring.

This was consistent with what Riley had described in Vaerwald. The mages had created custom utilities based around the nature of their underlying mana and those facilities incurred a daily mana charge. Riley had mentioned that the cost was exorbitant, and the mages had begun charging citizens a “mana toll” to use certain services, likely to supplement each well's normal mana generation. Even with this system, it still seemed incredible to Jason that they had managed to keep an entire city afloat. Although, he also had no idea how the other affinities generated resources. He suspected they might have easier ways to obtain mana than by killing things.

An excited smile crept across his face as he stared at the notification hovering in front of him. Either way, this meant that his idea for manufacturing the potions was “possible.” He could work with possible. The next step was to talk to Eliza.

* * *

Jason found Eliza sitting in her laboratory. Perched on a stool and hunched over a set of vials, her hands darted through the air as she carefully measured and poured various powders into the containers. As he entered the side cavern, he couldn't help but notice

once again how vacant it looked. Eliza's entire setup barely filled a corner of the massive cavern.

Perhaps he had found a way to fill the nearly empty space. He sure hoped so.

"Hi, Eliza," Jason greeted the mage.

Eliza promptly jumped a foot into the air, landing awkwardly back on the stool before toppling to the ground with a grunt and the sound of breaking glass.

"Shit. I'm sorry," Jason blurted, rushing to help her up. "I didn't mean to startle you."

"I-it's okay," Eliza managed to mumble, her cheeks red as she regained her feet. He quickly helped her tidy up the floor and her workbench, removing the sharp shards of glass.

"Are you here to check on the potions?" Eliza asked tentatively. "I've been working as fast as I can, but we still only have a few dozen."

"That's okay," Jason replied with a dismissive wave of his hand. "I actually think I might have an idea to help with that, but first I have a question. What you said the other day about automating the manufacturing process, is that really possible? Like if we were to automate every step involved in brewing the health potions, could you run the process by yourself?"

Eliza looked at him quizzically, pushing at her glasses with a finger as she considered his question. "I mean, technically yes. That seems impossible, though. You would need to prepare the ingredients. Then they would need to be distilled and mixed with the appropriate catalyst and processed into separate vials. The ratio of the various ingredients also needs to be precise. If the amounts are off even slightly, this can weaken the potion or possibly even make it poisonous to ingest."

"I think I have an idea for how to handle that," Jason said, trying to contain his nervous excitement. This was the moment of truth. He had spent hours that morning sitting in his virtual study and working on this idea – time he probably should have spent working on his actual schoolwork or Robert's programming assignments.

Jason tapped at his system UI and brought up his browser, projecting the screen so that it was visible to Eliza and rotating it so that she could see the display. A two-dimensional blueprint was now visible onscreen next to a floating three-dimensional model. He had been forced to find some *creative* uses for his new programming skills to acquire the original designs. Although, he hadn't done anything too unethical.

"I found some schematics for the machinery involved in factories that bottle things like soda and other goods," Jason

explained, hedging slightly on how he had actually obtained the initial designs. “Most bottling plants for canned drinks go through a process very similar to what we’re trying to do here. My thought is that we could use these designs as a starting point and then tailor them to accommodate anything specific we need for your healing potions.”

Eliza frowned as she stared at the drawing, biting at her lip. She swiped at the air and pulled up another screen, this one showing a series of handwritten notes and designs – likely from her time spent studying under Alma. She shifted her screen so that it was hovering beside the blueprints, a series of displays now projected in front of the pair.

“I mean, I guess it *could* work,” she said quietly. Eliza glanced at Jason. “But building something this intricate in-game would likely be expensive and time-consuming. That’s assuming we get it right the first time.”

An excited grin curled Jason’s lips. “I think I might have a solution for that. If you can help me modify this design to do what you need, I can give it a shot.”

Eliza was still skeptical, but she reluctantly agreed. The pair settled in and got to work. Jason soon discovered that the water mage had been right. The mechanisms involved in a real-world bottling plant were sophisticated and relied on an advanced computer system to run the machinery. In contrast, the pair was limited to the mechanical applications of his dark mana – and the fact that this fantasy world didn’t exactly have computers. However, Jason had already learned to code instructions for his minions, and he found he could adapt a similar process for the manufacturing apparatus, creating a sort of machine code for each part of the equipment. It also helped that the potion brewing process wasn’t *entirely* realistic, simplifying on some of the steps compared to its real-world counterpart.

Alfred could sometimes be a benevolent video game god.

A few hours later, the pair were staring at the 3D image of a modified set of factory equipment. They hadn’t found an easy way to make the machine prepare the ingredients, but it was capable of producing every other step and bottling the final product. Eliza and her assistant would only need to feed in the pre-prepared ingredients and set the vials that would receive the healing elixir. Eliza assured him that this would dramatically reduce the time it took to manufacture the potions.

At least, in theory.

“Do you think it will work?” Eliza asked, although Jason noted the excitement that lingered in her eyes. Some of her reservation had dropped away as they worked, and it was interesting to see her come

out of her shell. He had to admit that it had been a fun challenge.

"I guess we'll have to find out!" Jason said, hopping off his stool and moving to the unoccupied portion of the cavern as he pulled up the console for the mana well.

"What are you doing?" she called after him.

"You'll see in a second," he murmured in a distracted voice.

Jason navigated the well's menu and chose "Custom Building." As he did so, the world around him began to slow to a crawl, the effect barely noticeable in the otherwise empty cavern. The giveaway was that Eliza was now frozen in place and unresponsive atop her stool, her mouth open, as though she was about to say something. A building console had also appeared in the air before him. In many ways, it reminded him of the creation system for *Custom Skeleton*.

After a few minutes spent fiddling with the editor, Jason realized that the major differences between creating a building and a summoned creature were the materials and the cost. The building didn't have a hard material cost that required a stockpile of bones – the mana well presumably supplying the materials for him. Instead, a small readout was displayed in the corner of the screen indicating the total Spirit Charge cost of the structure, and another window showed whether the building would charge a regular maintenance cost. With the build window empty, the fields were blank.

Jason shifted the model of the factory equipment beside him and frowned in concentration. He had no interest in recreating the entire design from scratch, so he looked for a way to import the design automatically. A moment later, he found what he was looking for – an import feature buried deep inside the editor's submenus. Automatically uploading a real-world factory design into a fantasy video game felt like cheating, but Jason wasn't going to complain. Things hadn't exactly been going his way in-game lately. Besides, he should use the feature while it was available – especially now that Alfred had proven he wasn't reticent to nerf Jason's abilities.

As the build menu finished importing the design, Jason held his breath, his eyes hovering on the cost in the bottom corner. He let out a sigh of relief as he saw that the cost of the building was just barely below his current Spirit Charges. It would require a total of 50 charges and would incur a daily maintenance cost of 2 Spirit Charges. That was rough, effectively reducing his income by two-thirds. Although, he had already upgraded the critical villages and installed most of the Dark Spires. Now he was basically just hoarding mana for no reason. So why not convert that into money that he could use to help strengthen the city and equip his troops?

As his hand hovered over the "accept" button, Jason couldn't help but hesitate. Doubts flitted through his mind. He really hoped

that this was the right decision. Otherwise, he would have wasted a ton of money and most of his mana reserve on this gambit. Then his thoughts turned back to Riley, a small smile lingering on his face.

If he had learned anything lately, it was that sometimes you just had to take a risk.

As he pressed the button, the world suddenly jerked back into motion and several things happened at once. He could hear someone screaming at him. Although, the headache that was now pounding through his temples made it hard for him to concentrate. He belatedly realized that he was now on his knees, cradling his aching head. Wind whipped around him, and it seemed to be growing stronger, as though he were kneeling in the middle of a hurricane.

Suddenly, Jason was jerked backward and half-dragged across the ground. This stopped a few merciful seconds later, and Eliza's face loomed in front of his. "Are you okay?" she shouted at him over the noise that had filled the cavern.

"I-I think so," Jason yelled back, pain still radiating from his temples. He struggled to a sitting position, wondering what was causing all the noise.

He froze as he finally saw what was happening on the other end of the cavern. A hurricane was indeed raging inside the cave, except this one was comprised entirely of bone and dark mana. The storm swirled in a vortex of energy so powerful that it was throwing pieces of Eliza's equipment across the room, the metal and glass crashing against the walls. The cloud was becoming denser by the moment, bone and debris spiraling in a cloud that soon obscured the room's far wall.

Jason could still make out something happening inside the maelstrom, the debris occasionally parting just enough to see inside the storm. He thought he saw ivory bone knitting together in an intricate pattern so complex that he was having difficulty processing what he was seeing – despite the hours he and Eliza had just spent staring at this particular design.

And then, just as quickly as the vortex had appeared, the energy abruptly faded. Stray bones and ruined equipment rattled to the floor of the cavern, and they were left staring at the far end of the cavern. A massive set of factory equipment now filled the space. The entire assemblage was built of ivory bones, creating an intricate latticework. Bands and tendrils of dark mana were stretched between the bone, acting as some sort of magical muscle. The effect was that the equipment seemed to exude a faint dark aura.

It was a little hard to believe that this macabre machinery would be creating healing potions.

"W-what just happened?" Eliza murmured in shock.

"I'm able to create buildings using dark mana now," Jason tried to explain as he struggled back to his feet, his headache mercifully beginning to subside. "I guess that's what it looks like."

Eliza looked at him skeptically. "Maybe next time you should stand further back," she suggested in a dry voice. "You almost trapped yourself inside that machine."

Jason looked at her sheepishly, rubbing at the back of his neck. "Fair enough," he murmured. "Thanks for pulling me out of the way."

"Just remember that the next time I ask for ingredients," Eliza replied with a smile.

He glanced back at the machine, feeling excitement bubbling in his chest. He had survived, despite being an idiot. Now the fruit of their labor stood in front of them, almost seeming to beckon to him. There was only a single question remaining.

"Do you want to test it?" Eliza asked tentatively.

He looked over at the mage to find her staring at the machinery. She met his gaze as she noticed him looking at her, anxious excitement burning behind her eyes and mirroring his own. They had just created something entirely new, and the implications were both terrifying and exciting. They had likely just built the first factory in Awaken Online.

"Oh, hell yes!" Jason replied.

Chapter 36 - Burned

Jason stepped out of The Grove a few hours later. The massive steel door swung shut with an ominous bang, followed shortly by a series of thumps as the locking bars slid into place. A tired smile was plastered on his face, and the proof of his labor was clutched in his hand, the vial glowing with a faint red light.

They were in business!

Eliza was already working on the first batch of potions, and they were hoping to start putting them up on the market by nightfall – at a healthy markup, of course. Hopefully, the few days that had passed in-game hadn't allowed someone to flood the market with new ingredients and potions. Although, Jason doubted that anyone was capable of moving fast enough to beat him to the punch. It would likely take a group of players working together, and there were very few people with his resources at this stage of the game. Worst-case scenario, he could buy out whatever limited inventory was now available and then replace them with his products.

As Jason stepped out of the tunnel leading down into The Grove, lightning arced through the sky, illuminating the buildings on the northern end of town. Jason stopped and watched the scene for a few seconds as he mentally reviewed his to-do list. Things were starting to come together. They had almost secured the remainder of the outlying villages, and they might have a solution to their money problem. All that was left was to complete the second challenge and deal with Thorn.

At that thought, he glanced at the party menu on the left side of his UI, noting that Riley's icon was still grayed out. She should be on soon, and then they could tackle the infuriating dark room one more time.

"Hello, sir," a gravelly voice spoke up from Jason's elbow. He jumped slightly and stifled a yelp. *An evil overlord probably shouldn't squeak like a little girl*, he thought, rolling his eyes at himself.

He turned to find one of the Kin standing beside him, bleached-white eyes staring at him from under a heavy hood. The man was robed in dark leather and daggers were strapped to his waist. Jason's *Perception* immediately highlighted hidden blades tucked away in his sleeves and recessed pockets across his body.

He must be one of Jerry's men.

"What do you want?" Jason asked.

The undead man bowed his head. "Jerry assigned me to act as a

messenger for Cecil. The headmaster of The Cauldron requests your presence.”

Jason’s brow furrowed in thought. “Did Cecil say what he wanted?”

“Only that he wished to show you something,” the man replied evenly. Then he hesitated. “Although, he did seem excited.”

“Thank you,” Jason said. “You may return to your duties.”

With a final nod, the undead man retreated into the shadows of a nearby building and promptly vanished from sight. It seemed that Jerry had trained his underlings well, with discretion being even more vital right now with Thorn still at large.

Jason was curious regarding Cecil’s new invention. Perhaps the gruff little man had come up with something that would help outfit his troops or that might give Jason an edge in the second challenge.

There was only one way to find out.

* * *

Jason discreetly wound through the former noble houses, their windows dark and silent. Only the occasional flash of lightning and the faint gleam from a swinging lamp pushed back at the oppressive shadows. While they had repurposed some of the buildings for Morgan’s magic school and The Cauldron, most of the buildings in this part of the city had remained vacant. Maybe someday he would find a purpose for the empty, palatial structures – something that put them to better use than throwing lavish dinner parties and housing the city’s former corrupt elite.

Jason rounded a corner, and the crafting school – a two-story structure set on a sprawling estate – came into view in the distance. In contrast to the abandoned streets, this area contained faint traces of life and activity. Students came and went from the building and light shone from the windows. Although, the occasional dull thump and scream from the school were a bit disconcerting. The only solace was that he was pretty sure the undead couldn’t harm themselves too badly. Either way, the activity was somewhat comforting; it served as a reminder that his city was still alive and growing despite their troubles lately.

As he neared the crafting school, a group of undead students exited the building. They eyed him in surprise as he approached, their gaze quickly taking in his cloaked figure and the staff in his hand. Their conversation came to an abrupt halt as they skirted around him, their eyes suddenly focused on the ground as they gave him a wide berth.

There we go! At least I can occasionally look the part, he thought, grimacing as he remembered how Jerry's minion had caught him by surprise.

His self-congratulation was short-lived, however. Just as he was nearing the entrance to the school, he was suddenly tossed backward several yards, landing heavily as a roar of noise and light filled his vision.

It took Jason several precious seconds to get his bearings. His vision cleared slowly, the blinding sheet of white gradually fading to a mottled beige. Meanwhile, he was having difficulty making out any sound. His ears were ringing, and he could just barely hear muted shouts and screams. With a deliberate and painful effort, he managed to sit up – the world spinning precariously.

And then he saw the school.

A massive hole had been blown in the side of the second floor. Flames poured from the opening and were starting to spread to the rest of the ancient structure. The source of the screams also became apparent. Nearly a dozen bodies now lay on the street beside him. To his right, a woman lay on the ground clutching at her missing leg, congealed blood trickling from the open wound as she shouted in pain. A corpse lay to his left, its head severed from the rest of its body – which was nowhere to be seen. His flailing mind suddenly realized that the undead must have been on the second floor and had been thrown out of the building by the blast.

Jason pushed himself to his feet, the final stunning effects of the blast beginning to recede even as the full impact of what had happened finally struck him. More injured students were pouring out of the building, nursing wounds and burns. As Jason took in the sight of destruction, he inadvertently summoned his mana, and a numb feeling settled over his mind. Cecil frequently joked about students accidentally setting his school on fire, but this didn't look like a frivolous mistake.

This looked like an attack.

Troops were just beginning to appear from down the street, likely alerted by the sound of the blast. Jason called out as they neared, his voice commanding and carrying over the din. "Round up the survivors. I'll search the school." He received curt nods from the soldiers.

Jason put the remains of the dead to work, summoning zombies from the corpses that now dotted the street. Tendrils of dark mana crawled around his hands before racing toward the unmoving bodies. Only moments later, the dead began to rise again. He would need minions that could assist him in scouring The Cauldron for survivors. What he didn't want to do was put any more of his people at risk by

sending them inside. The bottom line was that he and his summoned creatures were expendable. Soon, nearly a dozen zombies had shambled over beside him, many missing limbs but still functional.

They'll have to do, he thought grimly. He summoned his *Bone Armor* using some of the bones he had stockpiled, the plating appearing on his arms and legs. If this wasn't a mistake, then he needed to be prepared. Thorn or his men could still be inside.

Jason and his minions ventured into the school and came face-to-face with a hellish scene. The entrance to the building led into a massive foyer, a grand staircase against the far wall leading up the second level. The fire was already ravaging the old building, spreading quickly through the dry, ancient wood. Part of the second floor had already caved in. An exposed beam had broken through the ceiling, now resting against the floor as smoke and ash filled the air.

"Find any survivors," Jason croaked to his minions, covering his mouth with the hem of his cloak as he quickly handed each zombie a healing potion. He silently thanked the Dark One that he had the foresight to bring the first batch of healing potions with him. "Bring them outside. Hand them a potion if they are injured. Force them to drink it if they aren't capable of doing it on their own. Their survival is all that matters."

Some of the newly minted zombies managed to grunt in acknowledgment while the more disabled of their number simply waved a working limb. But they set to work, splitting up to search the structure and trying their best to shamble around the flames.

Jason turned his eyes to the staircase. His thoughts were on Cecil. He wanted to save as many of the students as possible, but the small man was vital – assuming he was still alive. They could replace a novice, but there was no substitute for experience. With that grim thought, he set off, making his way up the stairs as best as he could.

As he reached the second floor, a wave of heat struck him, the blast feeling almost like a solid wall of force. The warmth was so oppressive that he had to fight to move forward, the hem of his cloak clinging to his mouth but doing little to filter the smoke that filled the room. Red notifications were flashing in his peripheral vision, informing him that he was having difficulty breathing – as if he couldn't tell. His arms and legs were already feeling heavier than normal.

He didn't have long.

He fought against the heat and flames as he forced himself to keep moving through the hallway. The fire lapped at his armor and cloak, singeing the material. He knew Cecil's office was near the source of the explosion and breathed a sigh of relief when he saw the door was still intact. He didn't waste time with the doorknob, giving the

wood a hard kick. The door promptly splintered inward with a renewed rush of flame.

Jason followed close behind, not bothering to protect himself from the hungry fire.

“Cecil,” he tried to shout over the roaring flames, his voice coming out as a croak. “Cecil, are you here?”

For a long moment, as he searched the room, he heard no response. Then he could barely make out a low groan, and his *Perception* ability flashed, highlighting a glimmer of blue beneath a pile of rubble. As he neared, he saw that his skill had caught the edge of a boot. It looked like the wall had partially collapsed, a beam now resting atop the mixture of broken timber and plaster. A quick inspection confirmed that the trapped person was still alive.

There was only one solution.

Summoning what remaining strength he had left, Jason gripped the beam. Flames lapped at the wooden surface and streamed across his hands, burning and blistering his skin. He ignored the pain, channeling it away like he did during training. His muscles strained as he lifted, the beam creaking under the force but refusing to rise. He struggled harder, giving it everything he had, but it still wasn't enough.

Growling in frustration, Jason grabbed his staff, immediately channeling *Soul Slash*. He swiped at the beam twice, slicing out a chunk of the wood neatly. Then he ripped the block free and removed some of the rubble, exposing the fallen man beneath. He was greeted with Cecil's ragged form. His chest was barely moving, and both of his legs rested at an unnatural angle. He was barely alive.

Moving as fast as he could, Jason grabbed one of his new healing potions, his burnt and bleeding hand staining the vial black. He ripped the cork free with his teeth, splashing the contents on Cecil's legs before dumping the remainder into his mouth. The engineer's skin began to knit together slowly, but Jason wasn't sure it was enough. His vision was already starting to blur from the lack of air and Cecil had been up here longer than him. If he didn't die from his injuries, he would still asphyxiate.

“Don't you dare die on me, you asshole,” Jason growled at the man as he picked him up and slung him over his shoulder.

The entire floor gave a shudder, and Jason felt the floorboards beginning to collapse. As he stumbled back into the hallway, he could see that the staircase was a ruined mass of flames and embers. He wasn't getting out that way. That only left one option.

He forced himself to move to the ruined hole in the side of the building, smoke streaming out of the opening. Each step felt like torture as the flames burnt away his skin, and his muscles screamed in

protest – demanding fresh air. As he neared the hole, he gave himself over to his dark mana, channeling what little strength he had left. Then he leaped.

If it were just him, he could have used his *Dark Incarnation*. But he couldn't risk dropping Cecil, so instead he tensed – anticipating the landing. The bottom dropped out of his stomach as he launched into a freefall, the smoke obscuring his sight. It felt like an eternity passed, but only a few seconds later, he hit the ground. His boots slammed into the cobblestones of the street, and he felt something pop in his right ankle, the pain difficult to pinpoint beneath the burns that already riddled his skin.

Jason promptly toppled to the ground, still managing to shelter Cecil with his ruined body. He was immediately encircled by his troops, who pulled the pair clear of the collapsing building. Then Jason turned back to the engineer, ignoring his burnt hands, broken ankle, and the notifications that still warned him of his precarious condition.

He ripped open another healing potion and forcefed the contents to Cecil, watching the man expectantly. A torturous moment later, he moved slightly, and his breathing relaxed. His eyelids fluttered open, although his gaze was still vacant and confused.

Jason leaned close. "Who did this? What happened?" he demanded, hoping the engineer could understand him.

Cecil's eyes seemed to focus on him for just a second, his throat contorting as he tried to make use of his ravaged vocal cords. "Th... Thorn," he managed to croak before passing out.

One of the nearby soldiers rested a hand on Jason's shoulder. "Sir, you need to drink a healing potion. You're badly injured."

Jason shrugged off the hand. Through pure force of will, he managed to pull himself back to his feet, favoring his injured ankle slightly and ignoring the black blood that dripped from his ruined skin. His cowl was pulled back, and the pale flesh of his face had been burned a charred black. He looked like a demon, his eyes glowing darkly as ash drifted off his cloak, the embers still burning along the cloth.

His obsidian gaze was fixed on the ruined school, flames leaping up into the air as the rest of the structure began to collapse. Nearby, his few remaining zombies and the survivors looked on – their expression a wary mixture of pain, concern, and fear as they watched Jason. Some of the Kin even reached for their weapons out of reflex at his menacing appearance. Yet no one moved to stop Jason.

Rage bubbled and boiled in his veins as he witnessed the destruction. This was enough. The Order had gone unchecked for too long. He was responsible for this. For not being strong enough or

smart enough to stop this massacre. That ended now.

“Sir?” the soldier offered tentatively, trying to hand him a potion.

“There will be time to heal my wounds later, soldier,” Jason said darkly, his voice unnaturally harsh from sucking in lungfuls of hot, ash-filled air. “Now is the time for vengeance.”

He looked back at his people. “I pledge to you that I will find those responsible for this. I will personally hunt them down, and I will make them suffer a thousand-fold for what they’ve done here. No one fucks with the Twilight Throne and lives. No one.”

Chapter 37 - Desiccated

Nearly an hour later, Jason found himself below the keep once again. He had eventually succumbed to his troops' insistence that he drink a healing potion. It didn't take long for the elixir to repair his ruined skin and shift his ankle back into place with an unsettling crunch. His throat still felt raw, but otherwise, there was little evidence that he had nearly burned alive while trying to save Cecil. Looking back on the experience, he wasn't certain he would have been able to endure the pain if not for his training and his dark mana, the energy numbing him to the sensation.

When he managed to calm down, he had also been able to take stock of the situation. His hastily summoned minions had rescued nearly two dozen students, force-feeding them potions and allowing them to escape the flaming building despite their injuries. More than one zombie had used its own decayed body as a shield, accepting the flames to save the Kin.

In total, nearly twenty Kin were either dead or missing and many more were injured. There had been no sign of Thorn or his men, and it wasn't clear whether they had been in the building during the blast or had planted some sort of bomb earlier in the day. No additional information was forthcoming from Cecil. The engineer had lapsed into a coma – a testament to how close he had come to dying. Jason had left the Kin with orders to keep feeding him health potions every few hours. Cecil's work was not finished, and he would not let the Dark One claim him yet.

As Jason entered the second challenge room, his gaze took in the shadows that hovered on the other end of the room, the lone sapphire torch barely pushing back at the soupy darkness. Even now, anger still simmered in his veins as he thought about the attack. They needed to beat this challenge. Only a little over a week remained in-game until Thorn's deadline. This translated to roughly three days in the real world. Their time was almost up. More than that, Jason was hungry for a rematch. It was time someone taught that bastard a lesson.

His thoughts were interrupted as a flash of multi-colored light tore open the air, and Riley appeared beside him. She looked around in confusion for a moment before her gaze trained on Jason. "Hey, how are..." she began, hesitating as she saw the look on his face.

Without another word, Riley moved forward, wrapping her arms around him. The gesture was comforting and helped to mute his

anger and worry. "What happened?" she murmured.

Jason recounted the story, starting with the factory that he and Eliza had built in The Grove and the message he had received from Cecil. By the time he'd finished, a similar expression of rage and horror lingered on Riley's face.

"Damn," the fury muttered. "This is too much. What is this Thorn thinking? Is he really any better than the gods? Attacking our troops and sabotaging construction projects is one thing, but attacking a building full of students..."

"It's what I would have done," Jason replied darkly, sparing a guilty look at Riley. "He's doing the same thing I did to Alexion when he attacked the city, using a small force to terrorize our people. The goal is to reduce morale and keep your opponent on the defensive – since we aren't certain where the hell he'll strike next. Between the crippling injuries to our people and this latest attack, it's clear that the bastard is waging a guerilla war against us."

Riley grimaced. "Okay. I mean, I can't really disagree with that. It also leaves us in a weakened state for whatever he has planned in the next week or so. I guess the only question is whether there is anything we can do about it."

"Jerry hasn't been able to discover anything," Jason replied, rubbing at his eyes. "I spoke with him briefly after the explosion. He's about ready to pull his hair out looking for the Order. Not that he has much left," he added, the joke landing flat given the seriousness of the problem they faced.

Jason sighed. "Which leaves us with a single option. We need to finish these challenges and reinforce the city and our troops as much as we can while we wait for whatever is coming. That way, when Thorn does show his face again..."

"We kill him. Preferably in as painful a way as possible," Riley finished for him, channeling her dark mana. Her irises turned black, punctuated only by a thin circle of crimson where her pupils might have been.

"Exactly," Jason murmured darkly. His own mana surged through his veins, automatically responding to Riley's bloodlust. "But first we need to beat this second challenge. At least I have an idea for how to tackle that problem. I was able to sense the location of whatever creatures occupy the room during our last attempt. If we work together, we may be able to corner them and complete this thing."

"Just tell me what you want me to do," Riley replied evenly, pulling her daggers from their sheaths with the hiss of steel on leather.

Damn, I like this girl, Jason thought to himself as he watched Riley – her hair tucked into her hood, robed in dark leather, and rage

shining in her ebony eyes.

* * *

A few minutes later, the pair stood in a pitch-black room, eyes firmly shut and ears straining to pick out any sound amid the darkness. Their backs were pressed to the stone wall, its rough surface poking into their spines despite their armor. Jason could hear Riley's faint breathing beside him, her arm almost touching his. Their plan would require pinpoint precision and timing. They were just waiting for the creatures to make their move.

Swish.

Almost before the sound finished, the pair launched forward. Jason pushed himself from the wall, using every ounce of strength he possessed. He rocketed forward, feeling the rush of air across his skin. A whooshing sound sped past him, signaling that he had narrowly avoided a strike. He could hear the muted sound of Riley's footsteps as she raced along beside him. His *Listening* skill created small flashes in his mind's eye to designate her location.

Swish. Swish. Swish.

The pair split to either side, Jason banking a hard right while Riley moved left. They had a sense of the creatures' position now. They were clumped up against the far wall and moving slightly to the left, the second strike having given away their movements.

Jason moved just a hair too slowly and a blow clipped his shoulder, sending him stumbling for a split second and cracking the bone armor on his shoulder. Yet he didn't stop moving. They couldn't. The pair kept moving forward, racing toward the creatures and boxing them in, pushing them toward a corner of the room.

Their enemies seemed to anticipate what they were doing, the rustling sound coming hard and fast now. It took every ounce of concentration Jason had to avoid the blows and he gave himself over completely to his mana. Rage still bubbled in his chest, and he was acting entirely on instinct. There was no room for hesitation or doubt here. He dodged, weaved, and bobbed all while moving forward and keeping Riley to his left.

Riley's breath was coming in harsh gasps. The occasional grunt of pain indicated that she hadn't quite dodged an attack and gave away her location. His own lungs were under a similar strain; the pair couldn't keep this up for much longer. Their stamina was depleting quickly, but they were also getting closer. The sounds were now coming from only a few yards away, and they had boxed in whatever

was attacking them, forcing the creatures into a corner.

“Now,” Jason shouted.

This was what they had been waiting for.

Both Riley and Jason rushed forward, forgoing any sort of defense. A blow slammed into Jason’s chest, but he fought through the pain. This was nothing compared to nearly burning alive. He automatically reformed the *Bone Armor* with his free hand and a few muttered words even as he continued his headlong dash. Riley grunted in pain, and he noticed her health drop in his peripheral vision, a fleeting sense of concern filling his mind. He shook the worry off. He couldn’t be distracted by that. Riley was more than capable of taking care of herself.

And then, he was within range. Jason swung his staff in a wide arc while summoning his *Soul Slash*. Riley simultaneously stabbed forward, letting out a soft breath as she lunged. Their blows speared toward the location the creatures had occupied just a moment before.

Without warning, torches sprang to life all around the room in a blinding blast of blue light. The flames were so intense that the light even penetrated Jason’s eyelids – his eyes still firmly shut. He stumbled slightly, caught off-guard. He’d almost regained his balance when something whipped through the air horizontally and smashed into his chest, throwing him backward. He heard a soft thump as Riley was struck as well, followed shortly by a grunt of pain as she landed on the floor.

Jason hit the ground a few yards away, stone crushing into his back. The wind raced from his lungs as a red notification appeared in his peripheral vision, indicating his stunned condition. He forced himself to keep moving. This couldn’t end here. He rolled to the side, hearing something slam against the stone beside him and feeling debris strike his face.

He opened his eyes slightly, letting his pupils adjust to the light that now blazed through the room. What he saw left him staring in shock.

“What the hell is that?” Riley muttered from nearby.

Jason had been assuming they were fighting multiple opponents with the way the source of the attacks changed position so rapidly and with how many attacks were occurring simultaneously. However, only a single creature stood in the far corner of the room.

It was roughly man-sized, yet that’s where its humanity ended. The creature was a roiling mass of cloth bandages that were wrapped around its form in tight bands – concealing nearly every inch of its body and completely covering its face. Between the bands, Jason could make out tendrils of dark energy which lapped at the air hungrily. However, the most disconcerting part was how the bandages

seemed to shift and move like cloth snakes as they watched.

Even as Jason stared, he heard a familiar *swish*, and two cloth straps launched forward from the creature's body, racing through the air toward Jason and Riley. They both dodged successfully, now able to see their opponent's attacks. The blows smashed into the stone floor and walls, cracking the rock, but seeming to have no effect on the bandages. As quickly as they struck, the cloth immediately retracted back to the monster's body.

"What now?" Riley asked between gasping breaths. Their stamina was already low from having cornered the creature, but at least they could see it now. That seemed like it had improved their odds.

"We just need to get close," Jason said. "If I can get in one good hit, we might be able to end this." At least, he hoped so. He wasn't entirely confident that his *Soul Slash* would be enough to penetrate the steel-like bands, but it was their only hope.

Riley gave a curt nod, and they launched forward again, going back on the offensive.

The creature barely left them any room to breathe, much less attack. It gave up trying to move or reposition now that it no longer needed to conceal its presence. That seemed to give it an edge, making its attacks stronger and faster. The monster was now capable of focusing solely on using its bandages. Multiple cloth straps raced through the air toward them.

Jason dodged one blow and hopped over another as he struggled to keep moving forward. Even as he avoided one strike, the band had already retracted and was racing toward him again, making it almost impossible to get close. He could see Riley was having a similar problem, although she wasn't losing ground as quickly as he was.

And then Jason messed up. He crouched under one bandage and sidestepped to the right to avoid another blow. However, instead of the bandage to his left retracting, the cloth abruptly whipped to the side, slamming into Jason's hip. The blow threw him sideways into the wall, and another strap followed up immediately, crashing into his chest and slamming him into the stone. Despite his *Bone Armor*, he could feel something snap, and he knew at least one of his ribs was broken. He let out a hacking cough as he slipped to his knees, droplets of black blood spraying from his lips and staining the floor.

"Damn it," he croaked.

He saw another blow incoming and knew he couldn't dodge in time. He resigned himself to his fate as the cloth neared. Then a throwing knife slashed through the air and threw off the bandage's aim, causing the blow to go wide and crash into the wall nearby. Riley

appeared beside him, gripping his arm and hauling him to his feet.

The monster stood on the other side of the room, unmoving. It was like it was waiting for them to attack. Or perhaps it was just taunting them.

“We need a better plan,” Riley said in a low voice. “Attacking it from the front isn’t working, and we don’t have much time left before it kills us or we run out of stamina.”

Jason clutched at his side, feeling the broken rib shift beneath his skin as his natural mana regen tried to help his body recover. It would take some time before the rib reset on its own. Right now, he needed to work through the pain. He knew Riley was right, but he failed to see a way to defeat the creature. The thing seemed invincible. Its bandages acted like tentacles and allowed it to fend off both of them at once. If only they had another person like Frank or some way to overwhelm the monster – assuming it even had a limit to the number of attacks it could make at once.

As that last thought occurred to him, Jason hesitated. Did it have an attack limit? His mind was already reviewing the battle. In the darkness, he had never heard more than two or three of the noises at once. And when he and Riley had rushed the monster, it had only devoted two of its bandages to each of them. Could it only use four of the straps at the same time?

He couldn’t be positive, but he also wasn’t sure they had anything to lose at this point. It was time to gamble again.

“I have an idea,” Jason muttered, and quickly whispered his observation.

Riley simply looked at him in response, her expression grim. “I know what to do,” she said as a determined look settled across her face. “You are only going to have a small window. Make the most of it.”

“Wait, what do you...” Jason began. But it was too late.

Riley launched herself forward toward the monster and Jason struggled to follow directly behind her, forcing himself to ignore the piercing pain in his chest as he re-summoned his *Bone Armor* one last time – using the remainder of the resources stored in his body.

The monster didn’t move as it launched two bandages at Riley. Jason expected her to dodge, but instead, she held her position. Just as the bandages reached her, she did something insane. Riley accepted the blows and used the opportunity to stab into the cloth with her blades as she simultaneously tumbled forward. This essentially wrapped her in the bandages and trapped them against her skin. She had barely survived the maneuver, her health beginning to redline. He could only imagine the pain had been excruciating.

Jason leaped over her prone form as the creature struggled to

retract the cloth bands. Riley wouldn't let it, and she slammed her blades into the ground, using them to stop herself from being dragged across the floor toward the monster. Then the creature changed tactics and started to constrict the bandages, Riley letting out a tortured scream even as Jason heard a popping sound echo through the room.

He wanted to turn and help her – every cell in his body screamed that he needed to protect Riley. He couldn't bear the tortured sounds coming from behind him. Yet he forced himself to keep running. He couldn't let her sacrifice be in vain. If he turned back now, they would both die.

The creature seemed to realize that Jason was still coming and diverted its attention, sending two bandages whipping at him. But Jason was ready, and the creature's movements were slower than usual as it struggled with Riley. He whipped his staff forward and sliced a bandage out of the air with a well-timed *Soul Slash*, even while sidestepping the other blow neatly.

The creature seemed to become more frantic as it saw Jason closing. Riley's blades were ripped from the stone as it dragged her across the floor again, even while constricting the bands violently. She let out another scream of pain that was abruptly cut off with a choking cough, and then there was just silence. Jason felt dread well in his stomach as he realized what must have happened. Yet he refused to look at his group menu. He needed to focus – even if it took everything he had not to look back at Riley.

Then he was in melee range, and there was no room for any other thoughts. The cloth bandages were peeling away from the creature's skin now, creating a rustling vortex that revealed a core of malevolent dark energy underneath. Jason didn't slow down at all. He launched forward, springing toward the creature as he swung his staff, channeling every ounce of rage and mana into a single *Soul Slash*, roaring his fury even without realizing it.

This thing had killed Riley. Now it was going to die.

Multiple bands curled through the air, trying to intercept the blow. Yet the blade of dark energy sliced through each strand like hot butter. Jason could barely feel the resistance. His blow struck home, arcing through what might have been the creature's neck. A blast of dark energy rocketed from its throat and sprayed the ceiling, causing the stone to melt and warp under the pressure.

Even as the mana began to fade, the bands hung in the air for a moment. Suspended by the last traces of dark energy, they flailed like the last dying twitches of a desiccated octopus. The bands clawed toward Jason, trying to cling to his skin. Yet they lacked their previous force, now reduced to mere strips of cloth again as he watched the monster die.

As the creature's body finally broke apart and the bandages slumped to the floor in a haphazard pile, Jason looked down at the bundle with a dark expression. Pain still radiated through his chest and his eyes blazed with unholy power. He spat on the cloth, his black blood mixing with the spittle and staining the fabric.

"That's for killing Riley," he croaked in a hoarse voice.

Then he slumped to his knees, the last of his stamina finally running dry. They had won. It had cost them, but they had won. Now there was only one challenge left.

Chapter 38 - Charred

The airship settled to the ground with a jolt that sent a tremor through the wooden deck beneath Alexion's feet. Only a few dozen yards away, the edge of the dark forest loomed before him, the branches of the dead trees clawing at the air. His Confessors and Nephilim immediately disembarked and prepared a loose defensive line facing the forest, many nervously eyeing the nearby tree line.

"Are you ready?" Evelyn asked as she approached. Alexion noted that she still wore the same corset and tunic and wielded no obvious weapons. Her manservant Frederick stood close, his eyes watching Alexion like a hawk. Perhaps he was a bodyguard?

"Ready as we will ever be, I suppose," Alexion replied shortly. "It seems that the Twilight Throne's forces have nearly captured the last village within the dark city's radius of influence. They are too far away to reinforce the towns on the western border at this point."

"So, an easy win for us," she replied, a hungry grin curling her lips.

"I guess," Alexion replied noncommittally.

"You don't seem confident in our success," Evelyn noted dryly.

Alexion hesitated as he recounted his last conversation with Jason at the party. He had underestimated his nemesis before, and it had cost him dearly. He wouldn't make that same mistake again, even if it galled him to admit that Jason was a cunning opponent.

"When I spoke with him at the party, Jason indicated that these villages might not be unprotected," he offered tentatively.

Evelyn raised a single eyebrow in response. "How difficult could it be to defeat a few undead – especially since they were just recently converted?"

"I don't know," Alexion replied, irritation tinging his voice. "However, it may be wise to exercise caution."

This earned him a tinkling laugh from the woman. "Now that's something I never thought I would hear you say. By all means, let us proceed... *cautiously*." With this last statement, Evelyn stepped down the gangplank and onto solid ground. Frederick spared one last wordless look at Alexion before he followed her.

Alexion was left standing there, his thoughts troubled. A strange sensation welled in his chest, and he still couldn't shake the look he had seen in Jason's and Riley's eyes – as though they were almost different people, not the weak-willed playthings he had once known. He shook his head, suddenly angry with himself. He was just

being weak.

His eyes settled on the forest, glowing gold as he inadvertently channeled his mana. Evelyn was right; these villages wouldn't last long against his forces, especially with the element of surprise in his favor. They would take what they wanted, and the funds from selling their newfound slaves would be used to grow his army. Then no one and nothing would be able to stop him – not even Jason.

* * *

A few hours later, Alexion found himself perched in a tree looking out at the village of Fastu. The gesture was futile with the darkness that hovered over the forest, the boiling black clouds blotting out any trace of the sun. He could barely make out the walls of the nearby town, much less whether any guards dotted its ramparts. No torches or fires lit the encampment, and only the occasional shout indicated that unliving people resided inside its walls.

What did draw his attention, however, was the small icon that lingered in the corner of his vision, reminding him that his stats, as well as those of his troops, had been reduced by the evil aura exuded by the Twilight Throne. He had encountered this debuff before, and he knew it wasn't to be underestimated. Not only did it make his forces weaker, but it empowered the undead. They were fighting on Jason's home turf now.

With a frustrated sigh, Alexion jumped off the branch, using his golden wings to coast gently to the ground. At the base of the tree, his forces ringed him. His Confessors and Nephilim watched him expectantly. They awaited his orders as they clutched at their weapons, their faces faintly illuminated by the lone ball of light hovering nearby. Despite the blazing devotion in his Confessors' eyes, he still detected a glimmer of worry. Since his conversation with Evelyn, something had felt off, although Alexion couldn't place his finger on precisely what was wrong.

"Did you discover anything?" Evelyn demanded, tapping her foot impatiently. She seemed to have grown ever more frustrated as Alexion insisted on carefully scouting out the town before attacking. However, he was the one bearing the risk here if his men perished and so they would proceed at whatever pace he chose.

"Nothing noteworthy," Alexion replied evenly. "We are ready to launch the attack." His men shuffled anxiously at that statement, looking more alert.

"Finally," Evelyn muttered.

Alexion ignored her as he addressed his troops. "We will face a few challenges. There is no light since the town's inhabitants are all undead." He spared a glance at his Nephilim. "We will open the battle by creating a few globes of light over the town. We can't fight if we can't see what we're doing.

"The first wave will be the Confessors," he continued, eyeing the white-robed men and women. "Attack the front gate and burn it down. You will be taking the brunt of whatever resistance these villagers put up – although, I am certain you are more than capable of enduring this pain for the Lady's cause." Many of the white-robed men and women simply nodded, their eyes eager to accept whatever penance the Lady deemed necessary.

"Once the defenders are focused on the Confessors, the Nephilim will attack from the rear wall. Take the enemy from behind and strike fast and hard," Alexion instructed. "You will only have the element of surprise once. However, do not slay any unarmed townsfolk and, where possible, try to cripple, not kill. We are here for slaves. We only need to kill those that are too stubborn or too stupid to surrender.

"Understood?" he asked as he finished.

His troops all gave him various nods and murmurs of understanding.

"Okay, then let's get started. And may the Lady's light be with us!"

The Nephilim immediately filtered through the trees, moving north to flank the town. In contrast, his Confessors moved to the roadway and started to march toward the gate, abandoning any pretense of trying to hide as flames ignited around their bare fists and pushed back at the encroaching darkness.

"And where will we be?" Evelyn asked with contrived sweetness, her manservant still standing silent vigil beside her.

"I was thinking you deserve a front-row seat," Alexion replied with a faint smile. He offered a hand. "That is, if you will permit me to escort you." He noticed Frederick grimace at the gesture.

Evelyn's smile widened as she placed her hand in his. "Lead the way."

Without asking for further permission, Alexion pulled her close, wrapping his arms around her. Enjoying the look of surprise on her face, he pushed off from the ground. His golden wings flapped powerfully as the pair rose into the treetops. Below them, he could practically hear Evelyn's manservant growling in frustration.

Alexion soon settled on a wide branch with a good view of the nearby village, leaving his arm around Evelyn's waist to offer support. Or at least that's how he rationalized it to himself.

Evelyn frowned, and her brow furrowed in frustration. “That wasn’t quite what I had in mind,” she remarked pointedly.

“Ahh, perhaps I should have been clearer,” Alexion responded without much contrition, savoring her closeness and the off-balance look on her face.

The pair didn’t have much more time to discuss the awkward encounter as lights suddenly bloomed in the night sky, artificial sunlight now raining down over the village of Fastu and finally giving Alexion a clear view of the town. The first thing that registered was that the walls were no longer wooden – as his scouts had initially reported. Instead, they were a solid crystal-like ebony that stretched far into the air, with ramparts running the length of the barricade. Even the gate appeared to be made of the same substance.

Besides these changes, Alexion noted a thin spire near the gate that towered above the small town. The structure had been almost invisible in the darkness, but now he could see that it seemed to radiate a dark aura that set his teeth on edge. He had no idea what the tower might be able to do, but it appeared that caution had indeed been a good course of action – even if his plan might be stymied since the gate was no longer constructed of wood.

Not that it would likely matter. Even if the Confessors couldn’t break into the town, the Nephilim could still use the distraction to slay the defenders by attacking from the rear.

As though his thoughts had summoned them, the white-robed men and women came into view, nearing the gates. Alexion could hear a cry of warning fill the air as the villagers noticed their presence. Shadowy forms soon filled the walkways above the gates, drawing back on the strings of their bows as they prepared to fire. The Confessors broke into a sprint, and a hail of dark missiles met their charge. They never wavered or broke formation as the wooden shafts penetrated their skin. Instead of pulling the missiles free, the Confessors channeled their flames. Their fires burned away the shafts, and their wounds closed as their natural regeneration took hold.

A few tense moments later, they were at the gate. They beat their fiery fists against the crystal to no avail before a group had the foresight to band together. They formed a rough line facing the gate, leaving only a few feet between each Confessor. As one, they raised their palms to face the gate and shouted the Lady’s name. Fire rocketed from their open palms and crashed against the ebony surface. Some of the flames were deflected upward, incinerating a few of the undead on the ramparts that were too slow to move away. The others learned their lesson and retreated along the walkway to avoid the flames.

As the seconds ticked by and the fire continued to rage against

the gate, Alexion was worried that the attack wouldn't work. However, that concern was short-lived. A crack began to form in the crystal, growing and lengthening as the Confessors continued their assault. It was only a matter of time.

"Where are the Nephilim?" Evelyn asked.

"They should be coming..." Alexion began and stopped as his troops suddenly made their appearance. Dozens of white-winged men and women swooped down from the rear of the village, ignoring the unarmed townsfolk deeper in the town. Rays of light lanced from their hands as they struck at the undead defenders from behind. When they drew close, they broke into a dive, using their spears to impale undead flesh. However, the undead responded quickly to the attack, closing ranks and trading blows with the Nephilim, the dark aura strengthening their attacks even as it weakened Alexion's troops.

Finally, the gate began to crumble. A sickly black substance melted away under the intense heat, and the massive crack widened until chunks of crystal began to crash to the ground. As the gate began to waver and fall, it suddenly swung open, and the flames of the Confessors briefly obscured Alexion's view of the interior town.

A wave of force seemed to strike his Confessors, sending many flying through the air where they landed in a heap of crumpled limbs. As the flames cleared, Alexion saw that his troops had been met by a row of Death Knights. The residents had thrown open the gates at the last second, using the surprise to turn the tide on his white-robed zealots. More than one Confessor was now impaled on a spiked shield as the skeletal monsters waded through their ranks and many more lay unmoving on the ground nearby. A heavy weight settled in Alexion's stomach as he watched the scene play out.

Is Jason here? His eyes darted to the nearby forest, expecting a counter attack. Yet, as the seconds ticked by, no surprise force emerged from the trees – leaving him confused.

His injured Confessors managed to regroup, their wounds closing quickly as the zealots worked in groups of two or three to incinerate the massive skeletons. It was slow, grueling work as they tried to dodge the blows of the Death Knights. Meanwhile, his Nephilim closed ranks on the last of the defenders that were holed up near the gate, and the undead tumbled from the ramparts or fell to the ground at the gate – their bodies unmoving.

Alexion's troops squeezed the defenders from both sides, sandwiching them between his Confessors and Nephilim. There was no escape now. While the undead had put up a good fight, the battle would soon be over. As he watched, one of the last remaining undead rushed toward the thin spire Alexion had noticed earlier and his brow furrowed in confusion. Was this a final defense? Some weapon of last

resort?

The undead man's hand slammed onto the column, and a pulse of dark energy throbbed along the length of the tower before spearing into the night sky. The boiling black clouds responded to the energy, swirling slowly above the town as lightning arced through the air. Yet, no sudden miracle or reinforcements came to the town's aid. Alexion watched as his Nephilim advanced on the man, ripping him away from the spire but not bothering to kill him. They were here for slaves, after all.

And then, the fight was over, only the moans of the injured filling the air.

"That was fascinating," Evelyn murmured. Alexion looked at her for the first time, noting the way she was leaning forward on the branch, her eyes fixed on the dead and dying down below. Her lips were parted in excitement, and the bloodlust in Evelyn's eyes resonated with the darker parts of his own mind. The voice that lingered in the back of his consciousness whispered its appreciation.

"I suppose. However, this was costly," Alexion replied, tamping down on the voice and the uncomfortable thoughts that came to mind as he observed Evelyn.

He watched his remaining troops move to search the houses and gather the remaining villagers, but his gaze soon shifted to the bodies of his Confessors that littered the area outside the gate and the unmoving forms of several Nephilim in the interior of the town. He had experienced far greater casualties than he had expected, and he still couldn't explain the Death Knights that were defending the town. Had Jason left some of his minions here?

His attention focused on the dark spire that loomed over the town. What had that strange pulse of energy accomplished? He was still uncertain what that undead man had been trying to do, but it was clear that he had thought it was important.

Evelyn waved dismissively at the corpses of Alexion's troops. "The undead fetch a far greater price than the loss of a few soldiers. A single slave is nearly worth its weight in gold. You can replace your men easily enough."

She turned to glance at him, her face hovering only a foot away and his arm still encircling her. "Speaking of which, perhaps now is a good time to speak of our next steps."

"What do you mean?" Alexion asked in confusion. "I thought we planned to sack a single town."

"Well, we're still here, and we have a rather large cargo hold," she replied, placing a gentle hand on his chest, and leaning forward slightly as she met his eyes. "And you still have all of these troops at your disposal. Jason is distracted. Perhaps now is our opportunity to

take a few more towns. Think of all the money we could make. Think of the havoc we could wreak upon your enemy.”

Alexion hesitated. He could see some logic in her words, but he was still wary. Something had felt off about this battle – the unanswered questions still lingering in the back of his mind. Even the insidious voice that normally filled his thoughts was uncertain, urging something that at least resembled caution. Although, it was difficult to focus on the whispered advice with the way Evelyn’s lips hovered so close to his own.

“I’m not certain...” he began slowly.

Her eyes danced with excitement and greed. “Ahh, perhaps I just need to make it worth your while,” she purred, leaning closer. “Tell me, Alexion. What is it that you *crave*?”

And then her lips pressed against his, hungry and demanding – as forceful in her passion as she was in business. Evelyn took what she wanted from him and he reveled in the attention. When she pulled away, Alexion’s thoughts were sluggish and confused, and he found himself off balance yet again.

“So, what do you think?” Evelyn murmured, her breath hot on his face as she lingered only a scant few inches away. “Should we keep going?”

Despite the way his mind was struggling to keep up, Alexion didn’t miss the double entendre. “I think we can work something out,” he answered, meeting her gaze.

“Good,” she said with a pleased smile, like a cat that had just caught its prey. “Very good,” Evelyn whispered again as she moved closer. And then Alexion was too distracted to pay much attention to anything else.

Chapter 39 - Imprisoned

Jason ripped the cork out of the healing potion and downed the contents in a single gulp. Only a few seconds later, he could feel his broken ribs shift back into place with a pop and a flash of pain, even as the bruises along his arms and chest began to recede. Fighting the strange cloth creature had certainly been interesting. And by “interesting,” he really meant god awful.

As he recovered his health, Jason turned his attention back to the second challenge room. The torches along the walls were still active, casting the previously pitch-black room in a cool sapphire light. It felt strange to see the four plain stone walls after spending so much time in the dark. It looked so... mundane. And small. When he hadn't been able to see, the area had felt enormous.

A multi-colored flash of light ripped open the air nearby, and Riley popped back into the room, her eyes flashing with pain and anger as she felt at her chest. It took her a few moments to recover, and Jason gave her a little space, despite the urge to rush to her side. He could still vividly remember her tortured screams as the creature had crushed her to death. However, he also knew that it took some time to adjust with the abrupt respawn available in the keep. This wasn't something he could help her through – at least not immediately.

“You okay?” he asked a few moments later, setting a hand on Riley's shoulder.

“I've been better,” she muttered, managing to give him a weak smile. “So, did we win? Don't tell me you tripped or something at the last minute!”

Jason barked out a laugh, gesturing at the heap of cloth in the corner of the room. “Hey, give me some credit. I managed to kill the thing, although we didn't get the usual notification...”

Challenge 2: A Trial of Darkness has been completed.

Congratulations, challengers!

“Well, there you go,” Jason added dryly. “Proof that I'm not completely incompetent.”

“Ahh, it’s okay. You’re a work in progress,” Riley replied, patting him on the arm while her eyes danced with laughter.

Good, she seems okay, Jason thought to himself, smiling at her joke.

With that, the pair lapsed into silence, and Jason noticed Riley swiping at the air in front of her. This reminded him that it had been a long time since he had checked his own notifications.

As Jason re-enabled the prompts on his system UI, he was nearly overwhelmed by a cascade of windows.

x2 Skill Rank Up: Listening

Skill Level: Intermediate Level 3

Effect 1: 17% enhanced hearing.

Effect 2: Simple visualization.

x3 Skill Rank Up: Perception

Skill Level: Intermediate Level 5

Effect 1: 19% increased chance to discover traps and unnoticed details.

Effect 2: 9% increased chance to reveal hidden enemy information and weak points.

x2 Skill Rank Up: Toughness

Skill Level: Intermediate Level 7

Effect 1: -10% damage and pain.

Effect 2: Reduced fatigue duration by 18%.

x1 Skill Rank Up: Dodge

Skill Level: Intermediate Level 6

Effect 1: 8.0% Increased speed and reaction time.

Effect 2: 2.0% bonus to Dexterity.

x9 Spell Rank Up: Soul Slash

Skill Level: Beginner Level 10

Mana Cost: 500 mana/second.

Effect: 345% damage increase on strikes and the blade ignores light and medium armor.

x3 Spell Rank Up: Bone Armor

Skill Level: Intermediate Level 1

Cost: 50 units.

Effect 1: Create intermediate bone armor. Each piece of armor has 425 health.

Effect 2: Increased coverage by 13%.

Stat Increases:

+ 21 Strength
+ 16 Dexterity
+ 25 Endurance

“Geez,” Jason murmured to himself. That was a lot of information to process. While he may not have gained much experience during these trials, the stat and skill gains had far outpaced what he had managed to accomplish by defeating dungeons. Apparently, the secret was to literally kill himself training.

Suddenly, he felt the staff in his hand begin to vibrate. Dark tendrils of mana crawled up its ebony surface in bands before pooling at the top of the scythe. The energy formed a phantom blade for a few seconds, dark droplets pooling from the tip. And then, in a flash, the mana dissipated, leaving a notification screen in its place.

Call of the Dead

This staff appears to be crafted from some unknown obsidian substance. Upon close inspection, runes have been engraved along the shaft in addition to the scrollwork.

Quality: A

Durability: 92/100

Damage: 11-35 (Blunt)

+ 20 Willpower

+ 10 Intelligence

+ 10 Vitality

+ 1 to all active and passive dark magic skills
(Soulbound)

Grants Passive Skill: The Culling

After completing the second challenge of the Keepers, you have unlocked the special ability trapped away within the weapon. While equipped, the staff grants you the passive skill, The Culling. Killing opponents or sacrificing your summoned creatures will empower your *Soul Slash*, granting a stacking damage bonus of 20% (five stacks maximum). This bonus is additive with the regular damage of *Soul Slash* and is expended upon striking an opponent.

“What happened?” Riley asked, noting Jason staring at his staff in confusion.

“I-I think I just unlocked my weapon’s special ability,” he replied and proceeded to explain how the passive skill worked.

“Well that certainly seems useful,” Riley observed when he finished.

He could only nod in agreement. Although, he still wasn’t sure how he had unlocked the ability. Perhaps the staff was tied to the challenges or the Keepers specifically? That would sort of make sense since he had taken it off his predecessors’ corpse.

Jason hadn’t fully considered how he could use the passive skill yet. The description seemed to indicate that he could sacrifice his summoned creatures. That raised some interesting possibilities. That meant it might be helpful to have some zombies or skeletons at his disposal when he went into melee in order to empower his strikes, but, with the recent patch, that also meant he would be reducing his mana pool – and thus his own health. Maybe some sort of small summoned creature like the drones he had summoned in the Hippie’s temple would synergize well with the new ability.

“Are you two okay? You’re just staring into space. Are you sure you haven’t taken one too many hits to the head?” Rex’s voice echoed through the room, interrupting Jason’s thoughts. The skeleton’s shadowy form had appeared next to the column near the entrance to the room, and his dark eyes bounced between the pair, observing them with some amusement as they pawed at empty air.

“We were just checking on our progress,” Jason replied, swiping his notifications away and sharing a pained look with Riley.

“Ahh, reveling in your success. I get it,” the former general replied. Then he seemed to do a double take as he watched the pair, noting the way they seemed more relaxed with each other. “It also seems my little lock-in did wonders! I take it you two made up?”

In a flash, Rex disappeared and reappeared beside Jason, nudging him with his elbow. His arm passed harmlessly through Jason. “Or should I say made out? Huh? Huh?”

“Shut it, pervert,” Riley snapped, glaring daggers at the former general.

Rex assumed a woeful expression. “Come on. You could throw an old soldier a bone! It’s been a long time since I’ve experienced worldly pleasures, and I’m starting to think those days might be completely behind me now,” he observed, waving a misty arm in Riley’s face. “You know, it’s just this sneaking suspicion I have.”

“It’s still none of your business,” Riley retorted, crossing her arms and daring the former general to challenge her.

Rex sighed. “Fine. Fine. Anyway, joking aside, you two did well

when you actually started working together. You have progressed much faster than I expected.” He turned to look at Jason. “That was good thinking, boxing your opponent into the corner like that, although that last-minute attack left both of you exposed – as you discovered firsthand.”

Then he turned his attention back to Riley. “And your sacrifice was perfect! That was the action of a true Soul Guard, standing on the frontlines to protect her Keeper.” He side-eyed Jason with a small grin. “Plus, it comes with the added bonus of emasculating our dark lord over there. That’s only the second time you sacrificed yourself to let him pull out a narrow victory. I can’t wait to see you bail his ass out of a real battle and fireman-carry him to safety. Maybe we can get him a dress and a tall stone tower...”

Jason blushed slightly, which just made Riley and Rex laugh at him even harder. “Okay,” he finally interjected. “You’ve both had your fun.” He looked at Rex, who was still chortling at his own joke. “I do have a question, though.” Jason pointed at the bundle of cloth in the corner of the room. “What on earth was that? The first room basically just threw my own creations at us, but I’ve never seen anything like that creature.”

Rex grimaced, his humor fading quickly as he looked at their defeated opponent. His head was cocked to the side as though listening to something. “Fine,” he muttered, talking to someone they couldn’t see. With a sigh, he refocused his attention on Jason and Riley. “It might be easier to show you what – or who – you were fighting than to try to explain.” With that cryptic statement, Rex waved at the bundle of cloth.

As Riley and Jason looked on, dark mana seeped up through the floor and spread through the cloth until it practically glowed with the unholy energy. Then the straps lifted from the floor, tightening and shifting until the monster resumed its familiar humanoid shape. Even though Rex was standing nearby, and the challenge hadn’t begun again, the pair gripped their weapons tightly. They had spent too long getting battered by this monster to let down their guard now.

The creature stood nearby, watching the group impassively beneath the constantly shifting cloth. Although, it was difficult to tell where its attention was focused since it didn’t have any eyes. It made no move to attack, merely standing in place. However, Jason had the distinct feeling that the creature would rather be ripping them apart.

“Well then, introduce yourself,” Rex grumbled, waving at the creature.

The monster tilted its head, and a hissing voice came from its body, like the rustle of cloth. “My name is Logan.” Speaking seemed foreign to the creature, as though it hadn’t attempted it in a long time.

“Wait, you’re a person – or you were?” Jason asked in confusion, glancing between Logan and Rex.

“Yes,” the creature hissed. “I was once a common man... just like yourself.” Then it hesitated as it took in Jason’s horned face. “Or at least as you once were, dark spawn.”

A frown was plastered on Rex’s face. “You know that’s not quite true. Be honest, Logan.”

The creature glanced at Rex and Jason had the impression that it was annoyed, just a few seconds shy of attacking the skeleton. “You do not know me, teacher. You only think you do. The voices supply the memories, but do not think yourself to be in a position of power. You are a prisoner – just like me.”

“Prisoner?” Riley echoed in confusion.

An eerie rustling sound came from Logan, and his bands shifted more erratically. It took Jason a moment to realize that he was laughing, although that did nothing to make the sound more pleasant. “Of course. We are bound to these rooms, trapped here to serve the Keeper and his successors. Although it can take some of us many years to come to this realization.” He seemed to add this last comment for Rex’s benefit.

“No. Some of us just realize that what you view as a *prison* is a way to touch this world and its affairs – even after death,” Rex retorted. “It’s an *opportunity*.”

“Give it time,” Logan hissed. “You may change your mind.”

Rex folded his arms. “Either way, you need to answer the question, Logan. Tell them what and who you *really* were.”

A long silence fell over the room as the creature watched them. It seemed to be straining not to speak, the bands of cloth clenching and releasing erratically – as though it was being compelled to answer against its will. Finally, a few words drifted from the bundle of cloth, “I was... once a member of the Order.”

“There. Was that really so hard?” Rex demanded. The creature didn’t bother to answer the former general, and Jason could practically feel the anger peeling off Logan in waves.

“Wait, a member of the Order?” Jason asked. “I don’t understand.”

“Logan is right that not all of the souls committed to the well come willingly. Others can be bound through force,” Rex explained.

“But what’s the point of that?” Riley asked.

Rex looked at her sadly. “In short, interrogation. The well inters a creature’s soul – which is to say, its memories. A soul bound to the well, even unwillingly, can give up many secrets over time – once their will has been broken.” The skeleton hesitated, glancing at Logan out of the corner of his eye. “Although, the process can be gruesome,

and the result is eternal imprisonment.”

Jason looked at Logan with renewed interest. A member of the Order, huh? Then this was an opportunity to learn about their enemy. Based on the visions he had experienced at the Hippie’s temple, his guess was that Logan must have been imprisoned more than a century ago – before the gods fell. However, he might still know something about Thorn and his group.

“Then you can be compelled to answer our questions?” Jason began slowly, addressing Logan.

The cloth bands thrashed angrily. “Yes,” the creature hissed out, clearly speaking against its will. Riley frowned as she watched Logan’s discomfort, sparing a glance at Jason. He could see the unease in her eyes. Jason didn’t relish the idea of interrogating a prisoner, but they needed information. Although, he didn’t feel entirely sympathetic. Logan had spent quite some time beating them to a pulp, after all.

“Good, because I have questions. We are being attacked by a member of your Order, a man named Thorn. He says he is intent on destroying our city,” Jason said.

The rustling sound came again, signaling that Logan was laughing. “Then you are damned. I have watched your progress through these challenges, and you are not ready to face a member of the Order – much less a Scion.”

“A Scion?” Riley asked.

“It’s what the Order calls its officers,” Rex answered slowly, his head tilted again as he listened to the voices.

Jason ignored Logan’s taunting words. “That is your *opinion*. I am looking for facts. Thorn used some sort of power to drain my mana and then was able to cast dark magic at one of my companions. How did he accomplish this?”

Logan struggled not to answer, the bands thrashing even more violently. Yet, whatever magic bound him finally forced an answer. “Each initiate of the Order has gems surgically implanted in their hands and key portions of their body. These crystals can be used to drain mana from a source, and that power can be discharged later.”

Jason’s eyes widened in surprise, and he glanced at Riley. Now that was interesting.

“Does this ability come with any downsides?” Jason asked.

“Yes,” Logan replied unwillingly.

“Elaborate,” Jason demanded. He wouldn’t let the creature off the hook by playing word games or giving one-word answers.

“Our members must forsake all six affinities, purging the ambient mana from our bodies,” Logan hissed. “This means we cannot cast spells. To make up for this weakness, we train our bodies

rigorously. The Keepers of old tried to emulate our training with these challenges. This is part of why they bound me here, to help educate them on how to defeat the Order. But these rooms are only a pale imitation.”

“How so?” Jason asked, intrigued.

“The Order goes much further. Our training starts when we are still children. Every bone in our bodies is broken and reformed over and over again until they are like steel. This is followed by years of endless training. When we reach maturity, we must enter the Wildlands with nothing but our bare hands and survive for a year. Those that survive spend the remainder of their lives focused on honing their martial craft, living with a constant threat to our lives. You spent a week or two fighting in the dark, but our trainees spend *months* in the Blighted Caves without any way to see – until we can fight with our eyes closed.”

The creature laughed again. “This is but a taste of the differences in our *commitment*. Our members train for decades, and you hope to catch up in a mere few weeks? The arrogance of the Keepers has not changed.”

Shit, Jason thought. That would begin to explain why Thorn was so damned fast and strong. What Logan was describing was some sort of anti-magic super soldier that had been trained from birth. No wonder the previous Keepers had seen them as a threat.

“We will see,” Jason answered coldly. “No opponent is invincible. Now, tell me about these gates. Thorn mentioned that we had not opened one yet.”

The creature seemed to freeze in shock, the bands quieting. Yet no response was forthcoming. It resisted its compulsion with renewed vigor.

“Answer me, Logan,” Jason demanded, gesturing at Rex to help him.

The former skeletal general waved a hand at the monster, and dark energy ripped from the ground and lashed at its skin. It let out a howl of pain and rage, as the cloth straps undulated wildly. Finally, its will broke.

“The gates... access the Throne of the Gods,” Logan finally hissed out, still fighting against the compulsion. “They create a bridge between this world and their own. They offer a chance at redemption.”

“What does that mean? A chance at redemption?” Jason insisted, stepping closer to the creature. He was close to finally finding some answers.

Logan suddenly stopped struggling and leaned forward toward Jason. “They were banished from this world – the gods. We *won*. Now

the parasites want to come back. They ride along on humans like you, carriers for their insidious mana. They'll offer you rewards, strength, and assistance. They'll try to corrupt you, all the while holding back on what they really want."

"Which is?" Jason demanded.

"Power."

At this last statement, Logan strained against his bonds angrily. The bands lashed outward and Jason jumped back – more instinct than conscious thought. The creature thrashed and spun, snapping at the dark energy that bound it.

Rex seemed to be straining to keep it under control, both his hands now channeling dark energy.

"Stop it, Logan," Rex muttered. "You cannot break your bonds."

"No. But I can force myself back into the spirit world," Logan answered, his voice sounding strained. With a final flex of his cloth bands, the dark energy holding Logan together snapped. The straps ripped apart and flew through the room. At the same time, a tortured howl echoed through the enclosure, setting Jason's teeth on edge. The mana holding Logan's body together broke apart and streamed back into the floor, leaving a ruined pile of cloth in his wake.

"What was that?" Jason asked as the room finally settled once more.

Rex frowned. "Logan banished himself back to the well. There are limits to how far we can push a soul – even one that has been broken like Logan."

"We still learned a lot," Riley said in a low voice. "Although, Logan seemed convinced the gods don't have our best interest in mind. Are we sure the Old Man is really on our side?"

Jason had been thinking the same thing – for a while now. But what choice did they have? The power the dark god offered had allowed them to claim the city and had kept them safe from the other players. Thorn was a problem, but he was just one man and part of an ancient order. He was a single piece in the larger puzzle that they were trying to untangle.

"I don't know," Jason finally replied in a quiet voice. Then he glanced up at Riley. "But I don't see that it matters right now. We need to find and stop Thorn. After that, we can decide how to proceed with the Old Man and whether we plan to reform this gate."

Riley nodded in agreement, although she still seemed concerned.

Jason turned back to Rex. "I suppose that just leaves one last question."

"Which is?" the former general asked.

"What does the third challenge entail?"

Rex opened his mouth to respond, but a sudden gust of dark energy blew through the room, rushing to Jason and swirling around his form. He eyed the mana in confusion. What was happening? Was this Logan returning?

The mana abruptly condensed into the ghostly image of an undead villager. His expression was frantic, and his eyes were filled with fear and despair. "They attacked us," he gasped. "They attacked Fastu – winged angels and white-robed bringers of flame are slaughtering us all. We need help!"

The man glanced behind him, seeing some unknown assailant. "They are coming for me! I only have a few seconds..." Abruptly, the image broke apart and the man disappeared, the dark energy swirling back into the floor.

"What was that?" Riley asked, a stunned expression on her face. Even Rex looked surprised as he stood silently nearby.

"I-I think it was a message from the spire in Fastu," Jason answered, still reeling in shock and reviewing the system notifications on his UI. This was the first time he had seen the Dark Spire in action. It seemed that it was capable of relaying more than just a simple text message – much, much more.

Realization filled Riley's eyes as she considered Jason's answer. "Then that means... There is only one person who uses winged creatures and white-robed men and women."

"Yes," Jason answered darkly, his mana filling his veins in an icy torrent. By now, Fastu had likely already fallen. Anger flooded his mind as he realized that their messenger was almost certainly dead already. This was the second attack today. The second time that Kin had died while Jason could only stand by and watch.

"It seems Alexion has attacked one of our villages," Jason said grimly. Apparently, his rival hadn't taken their warning at the Cerillion Entertainment event to heart.

"If we leave now, we could be there in a day or two," Riley said. He glanced at her and noted that her own eyes had turned a dark obsidian, the promise of vengeance lingering in her gaze.

"We don't know whether the town is still intact or if Alexion plans to keep going. Either way, we can't leave the Twilight Throne – not right now," Jason replied grudgingly, grimacing despite the energy that flooded his body. He wanted nothing more than to charge off toward Fastu and handle this issue himself. But he had his city to think about and Thorn was at large – the recent conversation with Logan still fresh in his mind. They needed to complete the third challenge before their time was up. Which only left one option.

"Then we do nothing?" Riley demanded.

"I didn't say that. There is someone who can deal with this

problem. I just hope he can get there fast enough,” Jason added in a dark tone. With this last statement, he pulled up his system UI and the chat window, his lips pinched into a grim line. Alexion might finally get a chance to meet Frank in-game. Jason just wished he could be there to see it.

Chapter 40 - Timid

Frank surveyed the town, noting the bloodstained streets and the ruined houses. It was the same story, different location. His decision to focus on conquering the outlying villages instead of trying to find and destroy the native undead had paid off. They had managed to make it to three of the villages before the undead had attacked and wiped out the villagers.

Although, those towns had created a new problem – namely that Frank was forced to explain the two options facing the beleaguered townsfolk. It wasn't a great tradeoff, he had to admit. They could either all die horribly at the hands of the native undead and have their remains used to create a new generation of evil, mindless killing machines, or they could voluntarily take their own lives for a chance at immortality and the protection of the Twilight Throne.

Unsurprisingly, most of them had chosen the second option.

However, as his eyes took in the devastation before him, he was reminded that they hadn't been able to save every town. The native undead had struck long before they got there, the dried and flaking blood evidence of how much time had passed since the creatures had ripped these people from their homes and dragged them into the woods – fresh corpses to decorate their nests.

"This town has been stripped bare," Vera said, approaching Frank. "There's nothing left to salvage, and we haven't found any survivors. You can contact Jason and let him know that it has been conquered if he wants to convert this town."

Frank sighed. "I'm not even sure I see the point," he murmured. They were using these vacant towns as outposts. Converting the villages still increased the Twilight Throne's radius of influence. Frank knew that Jason's hope was that they could eventually be repopulated. Although, that assumed that they were able to deal with the native undead somehow. The creatures were growing stronger every day, and it was becoming dangerous for even the Kin to travel the woods.

"If it's any consolation, only one town remains," Vera replied, her bleached-white eyes untroubled by the destruction. At a certain point, Frank supposed a person became numb to it. He hadn't quite reached that point yet.

"Which I'm sure will be empty as well," he replied, gesturing at the barren town. "I feel like we're acting more like a clean-up crew

than a conquering army.”

Vera shrugged. “The result is the same, and, in many ways, it makes our job easier.”

“I suppose,” Frank murmured.

He just felt like something was off here. It didn’t make sense how strong the native undead had become, and he couldn’t shake the nagging feeling in his gut that someone – or something – was behind these attacks. They were just too consistent. It was almost like someone had targeted these villages, but perhaps he was simply reading too much into it.

Before he could say anything further, Frank’s UI chimed, indicating an incoming call. He swiped at the air and soon discovered that it was Jason calling. That was unusual. His friend had been incredibly busy lately. They had barely spoken except for a few curt messages. Although, Frank supposed that juggling the Twilight Throne’s ever-growing list of problems and the regulatory hearing that was ongoing in the real world were probably sucking up a lot of Jason’s time. When had things become so complicated?

At a questioning glance from Vera, Frank gestured for her to give him a moment as he accepted the incoming call. “Hey, man,” he greeted Jason.

“Hi, Frank,” Jason said. Something felt off about his tone.

“Are you okay?” Frank asked.

A sigh came through from the other end of the line. “No, not really. I have some bad news and I won’t try to sugar coat it for you. Alexion has attacked Fastu. One of the survivors sent a last-minute message using the Dark Spire.”

“Oh... oh, shit,” Frank muttered, glancing at Vera. A worried expression now lingered on her face as she witnessed Frank’s reaction.

“No kidding. I suspect Alexion sacked the town and there isn’t much left,” Jason continued. “It’s likely too late to reinforce or save the village. The message also indicated that he has his Nephilim and Confessors with him. Although, their numbers are unknown.”

Frank immediately pulled up his map. They were currently sitting to the east of the Twilight Throne, having traveled counterclockwise around the dark city as they “conquered” the outlying villages. That put them at least two full days away from Fastu – assuming they rode continuously, and they didn’t encounter any of the native undead on the way. Three days would probably be more conservative.

“Yeah, we’re a few days out,” Frank confirmed. “We were about to head to the last village now. I was actually just about to message you. This town has been wiped clean as well.”

“More good news,” Jason replied in a dry voice. “Fastu may be

a lost cause, but the other towns on the western border are now at risk. We don't know if Alexion plans to keep going. Many of the remaining towns in that area were populated when they were converted. I used some Spirit Charges to fortify them, but they probably won't withstand a full assault by Alexion's troops – especially if he conquered Fastu so easily.”

“You’re going to ask me to check on those towns, aren’t you?” Frank asked. It didn’t take much to connect the dots here. Although, that did nothing to calm the butterflies in his stomach. Alexion was not a simple enemy, and it sounded like he was traveling with a small army.

“Unfortunately, yes,” Jason answered evenly. “We can’t spare anyone here. Thorn has ramped up his attacks. Riley and I just made it past the second challenge, but we still have one to go. If there was any other way...”

“No, it’s fine,” Frank interrupted, not seeing any other choice. His worries aside, he had signed up for this. “I can head to the western border now. Maybe we’ll get lucky, and he’ll stop with a single town.”

“Maybe, but I sort of doubt it. It feels like lady luck has abandoned us lately,” Jason responded with a bitter chuckle.

“You can say that again,” Frank muttered, looking back at the devastated town around him, where the Kin were still inspecting each structure carefully.

“Anyway, thanks for this, man,” Jason added. “And if you see Alexion, please send him our *regards*.”

Frank gritted his teeth as he imagined one of his axes caving in the irritating blond asshole’s skull. Maybe there was one small upside to all of this. “I will be sure to tell him you said hello,” Frank replied with a chuckle.

With that, the pair cut the connection. Frank assumed that Jason would get around to converting this town when he had a spare moment. However, that was no longer a priority. His expression was troubled as he considered his next steps. For all his bravado near the end of the call, a voice in the back of his mind kept questioning whether he was really up to the task of taking on Alexion by himself.

“I take it that was more bad news,” Vera commented.

Frank sighed before giving her the rundown of the situation. Vera stood there, chewing on her lip in thought as she stared at the ground. “We may be able to accomplish both objectives at the same time,” she offered finally.

“What do you mean?” Frank asked. He could already tell he wasn’t going to like this idea.

“We still need to complete Jason’s quest and the final town is not far,” Vera explained calmly. “We also have two divisions now that

the Kin have finished tearing apart the first nest we encountered. I could take one division and head to the last town while you take the other and ride toward the western border.”

The butterflies seemed to have multiplied in number as Frank considered Vera’s idea. That meant he would need to face Alexion by himself. At least, until now, he had been able to lean on Vera for advice and guidance – her cold-hearted words of wisdom easing the burden of traveling without his friends.

“How are you going to contact Jason after you reach the last town?” Frank offered feebly, searching for some excuse that would avoid them splitting up. As an NPC, Vera didn’t have an easy way to contact Jason without using a Dark Spire.

Vera nodded. “As we discussed, I suspect it will be empty – which makes contacting Jason a moot point. If there are survivors, we can circle back to the west, and I can send a runner back here to send a message to Jason. That should allow us to kill two birds with one stone.”

Frank grimaced. He didn’t have a good counterargument for that strategy. It was a sound plan and allowed them to finish the quest while also sending reinforcements to the western border. But it still meant he would be forced to deal with Alexion on his own.

“I realize that this spreads our forces rather thin,” Vera offered, scrutinizing Frank’s expression carefully and picking up on his hesitation. “Will you be comfortable facing this opponent by yourself?”

Frank took a deep breath. *You can handle this*, he thought.

He’d come this far on his own – although that same doubting voice kept reminding him that Vera had done a lot of the heavy lifting. Maybe this was his opportunity to prove to Jason, and to himself, that he had grown – that he was no longer that sniveling fat kid that he had been when he started playing. He was the left hand of the Regent of the Twilight Throne and a force to be reckoned with. At least, that’s what he told himself.

Frank raised his eyes to meet Vera’s. “I’ll be fine,” he said evenly, despite the doubts that still lingered in his mind. “Let’s finish up here and then we will ride. We will need to move quickly if Alexion does plan to attack the other towns.”

Vera simply gave him a curt nod and stepped away, barking orders at the Kin. Frank watched her leave, his thoughts troubled. Despite how much he had changed, he still wasn’t sure he was ready to face Alexion. Although, at this point, he didn’t seem to have much choice. He would just need to do his best.

Jason terminated the call with Frank and turned his attention back to the challenge room. At some point during the conversation, Rex had disappeared. Now only Riley stood beside him, a worried expression on her face.

“How did it go?” she asked.

“Frank said he’ll head toward Fastu,” he answered, his forehead pinched in thought. His friend had sounded worried – not that he could blame him. Jason should be the one facing Alexion.

“Will he be okay on his own?” Riley asked, echoing his thoughts.

“I hope so,” Jason replied. “Although, we don’t have much choice.”

He sighed, rubbing at his eyes tiredly. “Either way, we might as well check out the third challenge,” Jason finally said. “We can’t afford any more delays.”

Riley raised a skeptical eyebrow at him. “Are you kidding me right now?”

“Uh, what?” Jason asked not-so-eloquently, glancing at her in surprise.

“Do you have any idea what time it is in the real world? You need to take care of yourself,” she insisted. “Besides, tomorrow is Monday. Don’t you have the hearing?”

Jason spared a glance at his clock in his peripheral vision, confirming that Riley was right. Between designing the factory with Eliza, the explosion at the crafting school, and tackling the second challenge, he had completely lost track of time. With a grimace, he also realized that he still hadn’t put up the potions on the player auction house or checked on his other bids. He needed to handle that before he logged out for the night.

And that was all putting aside the regulatory hearing. Claire would be testifying tomorrow – which forced him to remember the way she had approached him awkwardly at the Cerillion Entertainment event. He hadn’t had time to follow up with her, and he still didn’t know whether she planned to testify against Alfred or whether they had managed to sway her by explaining the situation. Putting aside his problems in-game, he might have a much larger issue to deal with tomorrow.

“Shit,” Jason murmured, closing his eyes and leaning back against the wall. It felt like a mountain of problems had settled on his shoulders.

He felt slender arms suddenly wrap around his neck and a pair

of lips pressed against his. He opened his eyes to find Riley looking at him from only a few inches away. "You're going to be fine," she told him firmly. "Just take things one step at a time."

"But..." he began, Riley immediately interrupting him with another kiss.

"I can keep this up for a long time," she said with a small smile as she withdrew again. "Any more buts?"

Jason couldn't help but chuckle. "This is sort of sending a mixed message. I can think of a lot of more to complain about if it earns me a kiss every time."

Riley rolled her eyes. "Uh huh. As though you need a reason to get all mooney?"

"Hey! I thought girls were into the brooding bad boys," Jason replied in mock offense.

This earned him another eye roll. "You might take it a little far. I think we might need to buy you some eye liner to go with the rest of your edgelord look." Then her expression sobered. "But, seriously, you have me and Frank and the rest of the Shadow Council. You're not alone. Just focus on what's in front of you right now."

"I only see a beautiful girl in front of me right now," he replied teasingly and leaned in again, even as he pulled her closer.

"Okay, that's enough!" Riley said as they broke away, pushing at his shoulders. She stabbed a finger at him. "You have five minutes, and then you need to log off and go to bed. That's an order, mister."

"Yes, ma'am," Jason replied with a mock salute. With that, the pair said goodnight and Riley vanished in a flash of multi-colored energy.

Jason was left staring at the spot she had occupied only a moment before. She was right. He knew she was right, but Riley also didn't understand the full extent of the problems he faced. Even now, his thoughts were already turning back to the hearing tomorrow. She didn't know about Alfred or appreciate the full import of Claire's testimony – how the future of this game and his livelihood hung in the balance. However, at least for a moment, she had helped him forget.

That was something, and he clung to the memory of her lips pressed against his like a lifeline.

With a sigh, Jason pushed himself away from the wall and his gaze focused on the doorway leading back into the keep. For now, he would take Riley's advice to heart. He needed to visit the market and then log off. As much as he wished he could simply bury his head in the sand and forget, the sun would still rise tomorrow, and the hearing would still happen – with or without him. He might as well be rested and prepared.

Chapter 41 - Traitorous

The leather creaked as Jason shifted in his seat. Nervous energy flooded his veins, having the opposite effect of his dark mana and causing his worried thoughts to spiral endlessly. He tried to distract himself by looking out the window, watching as the other vehicles and buildings rushed past. But that only served to remind him of how quickly they were approaching their destination – the local courthouse.

Jason shifted his gaze to the seat across from him where George sat staring at the screen projected along his arm, his forehead wrinkled in thought. Robert, Claire, and Francis had ridden together to the courthouse hours earlier, likely so that they could prepare ahead of Claire giving her testimony. Jason winced even as that thought crossed his mind. What would she do? That question kept rebounding through his skull.

“So... um, the event was nice,” Jason offered, trying to break the heavy silence that hung in the car – and to find some way to distract himself.

“The turnout was reasonable,” George admitted, sparing a glance at Jason before turning back to his Core. “Although, a few key business partners declined to attend. Apparently, this hearing is causing some concerns about the integrity of the game system.”

A sudden thought crossed Jason’s mind. “Speaking of which, did you discover anything at the party? I noticed the drones were well-positioned to record anyone approaching me...”

This earned him an appraising look from George, followed by a brief flash of annoyance. “Now that you mention it, no.”

George met Jason’s gaze, swiping away the screen projected by his Core. “We even expanded the scope of our observations to include anyone that glanced in your direction or mentioned your name. While you are certainly a topic of much discussion and we obtained some interesting gossip, we gleaned little regarding the leak. A few of the guests had sufficient motive to undermine our business interests and seemed unduly interested in you, but they weren’t in a position to obtain sensitive information.”

“Couldn’t they have hacked into the company’s network?” Jason offered. He knew the leak was Claire, but he would rather avoid disclosing that fact to George.

The CEO shook his head. “It’s possible I suppose, but incredibly unlikely. They would have needed access to the lower levels of the

building and our computer system – at a minimum. No. It is more likely that someone on the inside decided to blow the whistle.”

“So where does that leave us?” Jason asked, continuing to feign ignorance. “Are you thinking that maybe there isn’t a leak? Maybe Gloria stumbled onto something from reviewing the game files and the logs from the original trial?”

“Again, possible, but not likely,” George answered. “It could be that whoever is responsible for the leak is simply more cautious than I expected – or feels completely justified in their decision – which is a shame. Zealots are the worst sort of opponent. They don’t act rationally, they aren’t swayed by normal concerns, and their actions are unpredictable,” George added, his frown deepening and his fingers drumming erratically against his armrest.

The CEO appeared worried, although the sentiment looked strange on his face. It was like seeing a T-Rex look nervous – it just didn’t happen. That realization also did nothing to make Jason feel better. If George seemed out of sorts, that was likely a terrible sign of what was to come, especially given the secrets Jason harbored.

Jason abruptly decided that talking may have been a mistake. He just felt even more nervous than he had before.

George sighed. “Either way, we will just have to muddle through. Hopefully, Claire’s testimony today will help alleviate some concerns. She has been a staunch supporter of the project since day one,” he explained, although Jason noted the way the rhythm of the CEO’s fingers on his armchair became briefly discordant as he hesitated.

Does he suspect Claire? Jason wondered. Not trusting his voice, Jason just nodded in agreement, trying his best not to let his thoughts show on his face.

George refocused his attention on Jason. “I did, however, notice an altercation between you and Alex at the event.”

“It was nothing,” Jason said, shifting his attention to the window. Alex was a touchy subject for a number of reasons.

“It didn’t look like nothing and security almost had to intervene,” George replied dryly. “Not that I am blaming you, of course. I listened to the recording, and I am aware that my son can be a bit *abrasive* at times.”

No shit, Jason thought.

Apparently, he hadn’t done a good job of keeping his expression neutral, earning him a chuckle from George. “I can see you that you agree. As a parent, I should be rushing to the defense of my son. However, I see something in you. *Potential*, I suppose is the right word. So, I’ll take a different tack here.”

George hesitated before continuing, glancing out of the

window. “There will always be those that challenge you and back you into a corner – those that are more powerful and more knowledgeable. From experience, all I can say is to never back down and never show weakness. If there is something you want, take it. If your opponent is stronger than you, then wait quietly and study them until you find an opportunity to strike. Otherwise, you will always find yourself finishing last.”

Jason tilted his head. In some ways, the CEO’s words echoed the message of the dark god inside AO. It felt strange, as though George should be ranting at him for threatening his son. Instead, he was urging Jason to be more ruthless?

George turned his attention back to Jason, meeting his eyes once more. “Although, make no mistake, if there is a public conflict between the two of you, I will be forced to back my son. Do we understand each other?”

“Yes, sir,” Jason said quickly.

With that, the pair lapsed into an uncomfortable silence. The conversation hadn’t done anything to make Jason feel better. If anything, he was only left with more questions and a new worry. What was George urging him to do? Was the subtext of that conversation that he would support Jason so long as he didn’t publicly confront his son? He would need to keep that in mind. He had a feeling that his war with Alex wasn’t over – not by a longshot.

* * *

The courtroom was packed to the brim when Jason and George entered. Many people turned to watch their entrance. Reporters and bystanders murmured to themselves while the drones buzzing through the air pivoted to focus on their faces. Clearly, Jason was becoming something of a real-world celebrity – if only because he seemed to have an unenviable ability to attract chaos like some sort of karmic black hole.

Jason took a seat near the front of the gallery, settling in beside Robert and Claire. The engineer had his feet propped on the wooden half-wall that separated the courtroom floor from the sitting area. Meanwhile, George assumed his position beside Francis at the small table at the front of the room. Jason could see that Gloria was in attendance as well, a familiar grim expression lingering on her face as she reviewed her notes.

Robert gave Jason a lopsided grin. “Hey there, our evil overlord. Ready for another day of exciting testimony?” He mimed air

quotes with his fingers as he said the word exciting.

"I guess," Jason replied with a noncommittal shrug, looking at Claire. Dark circles hung under her eyes, and her hands were clenched in her lap. She looked exhausted.

As she noticed his attention, Claire met his eyes briefly before quickly looking away. Jason wasn't certain whether that was a good sign or not. A small part of him had at least hoped to see some sort of resolution in the woman's expression – an indication that she had made a choice. Instead, what he saw instead was a person wracked by sleepless indecision.

Robert let out an exaggerated sigh. "Well, aren't you two just a bundle of laughs? I'm not sure why I seem to get straddled with a bunch of boring worriers. It'll be fine! We went through years of testing. And now we get the pleasure of going through that entire mind-numbing process again."

Jason wished he had Robert's confidence. "You're probably right. I'm sure it will be fine," he said in a low voice, glancing behind them at the rest of the onlookers – many of whom were looking their way. This wasn't a good place to have this conversation, and he wondered if he should get Francis and George to tell the engineer to shut up.

He was saved from having to take this step as Senator Lipton entered through the judge's chambers, followed by the rest of the regulatory committee. They soon settled into their usual positions, and the senator's gaze hovered on Gloria.

"Alright. We are calling this hearing to order. Today we will be hearing from a witness called by Ms. Bastion. Claire Thompson, will you please take the stand?"

Claire gave a curt nod and rose to her feet, glaring at Robert impatiently to remove his legs, which he did grudgingly, another shit-eating grin on his face. Even now, he teased Claire. As she passed Jason, Claire spared another glance at him, meeting his eyes. He didn't see anything there to make him feel more confident.

Claire assumed a seat on the witness stand and went through the process of being sworn in. Soon – almost too soon – Senator Lipton looked at Gloria. "Alright, Ms. Bastion. It's your witness. Please feel free to begin."

Gloria rose to her feet slowly, carrying a set of crisp notes in her hand as she approached the witness stand. "Hello, Ms. Thompson. Can you please state for the record your position at Cerillion Entertainment and your role in developing AO and the game's AI controller?"

Claire coughed to clear her throat. "I have held several positions at Cerillion Entertainment over the years. However,

regardless of my title, I have always worked as a project manager, coordinating the activities of our company's engineers and software developers. For example, I worked on the initial development of the AI controller and participated in the internal study conducted by Cerillion Entertainment in conjunction with the CPSC's formal review. I now head the group of system administrators that operate AO."

She took another deep breath before continuing. "Regarding my role in developing AO and the AI controller, I have been involved in this process since day one. Again, my responsibilities typically included managing other people's activities and so I did not have much direct involvement in development. I left the actual programming and engineering to others."

"I understand," Gloria replied with a nod. "But it is safe to say then that you are intimately familiar with how the game was developed and specifically how the game's AI controller has interacted with the game world since the beginning of this project?"

"That is accurate, yes," Claire said with a nod.

"Mr. Graham told us during his testimony that certain restrictions were placed on the AI controller during development – what he referred to as primary and secondary directives. For example, the AI controller was prohibited from accessing certain portions of the player's mind, including their memories. To your knowledge, have those directives changed during development?"

"I'm not certain what you mean," Claire replied, her brow furrowed in confusion.

"No problem. Let me approach this a different way. We have had many reports that the in-game quests are tailored to a player's individual background – yet the AI controller does not have any access to the players' personal information. This would seem to indicate that the AI is accessing the players' memories.

"During his testimony, Mr. Graham also indicated that the AI controller was prohibited from manipulating the players' memories. Have there been any substantive changes to the AI director since the CPSC testing was conducted?"

"Well, of course. We have made changes to multiple game systems since then. Alfred's processes are also constantly updating," Claire explained. "That's sort of the point of having an AI control the game world – to ensure a dynamic experience for our players." She tilted her head slightly as though she was confused by Gloria's line of questioning.

"I mean, AO, at its core, is just like any other MMO," she continued. "We are constantly updating and changing many game systems, and that includes the AI director. For example, we just released an extensive patch within the last few days. Many players

also provide quite a bit of information when they register their accounts, and Alfred is able to track and respond to their behavior in-game, including anything they say to the NPCs and other players. That might explain the type of customization you are seeing.”

A small frown tugged at the corners of Gloria’s lips. Jason could only assume that she had expected a different answer. Or maybe she had expected Claire to elaborate further since Gloria’s question had been pretty open-ended. Jason watched the exchange anxiously. Was Claire about to switch sides? He could feel a faint seed of hope beginning to bloom in his chest.

“Understood,” Gloria continued. “Then let me get to the heart of the matter before us. To your knowledge and given your experience developing the AI controller, have you witnessed *anything* that would indicate that Alfred has violated his safety protocols?”

Claire hesitated, her eyes focused on the ground and her expression troubled. From Jason’s point of view, the world seemed to slow to a crawl, and a heavy silence hung over the room. Here was the moment of truth. What would Claire do? The woman raised her head ever-so-slowly, meeting Jason’s gaze for only a few seconds. He thought he saw something there, some sort of silent acknowledgment.

“No,” Claire finally said.

“Well, that’s...” Gloria began before doing a double take, turning back to Claire. “Wait, what was that, Ms. Thompson?”

Claire stared Gloria down, her resolve hardening now that she had finally made a decision. “No. I have not observed anything in Alfred’s development or the subsequent release of the game that would indicate that he has violated his safety protocols. After extensive testing, there is no compelling evidence that either the game system or the AI controller poses any risk of harm or has caused any actual harm to the players.”

Gloria seemed completely floored, but the spectators in the gallery appeared unsurprised by this revelation. There were only a few people in the room that knew that Claire had just committed perjury. Jason could feel his pulse pounding in his veins, and even Robert was leaning forward, no longer assuming his carefree act as he stared at Claire.

Holy shit, she took our side, Jason thought. A tantalizing mixture of elation and relief flooded his mind. *Thank god!*

“Do you have a follow-up question or are you done?” Francis interjected as the silence lengthened and stretched.

“I am not done,” Gloria snapped at him. “Ms. Thompson, are you *absolutely certain* that you did not observe any issues with the AI controller at any time during development or after the release of the game?”

"I am positive," Claire said firmly.

"Hmph," Gloria said, her frown deepening. She inspected Claire carefully as though waiting for the woman to crack. When Claire didn't offer to elaborate any further, Gloria let out a final resigned sigh.

"That is interesting," the CPSC director continued before turning to Senator Lipton. "In that case, I'd like to enter into evidence Exhibit #167A. I will send you the file now." Gloria tapped at her Core as a murmur of confusion came from the crowded gallery.

Before anyone could react, Gloria pressed a final button, and a translucent screen flashed into existence beside the witness stand, rotating so that it was visible to the members of the regulatory committee and the gallery.

"This video log was recorded by Ms. Thompson and Mr. Graham while the CPSC was conducting their review of the game environment," Ms. Bastion declared in a loud voice that carried through the room. "Based on the time stamp, this clip was recorded approximately 214 days before the game was released to the general public."

Robert's grinning face hovered in front of the camera. "The past couple months have been interesting. Alfred has taken his changes to a whole new level. The game is now more immersive than ever before, and the participants' feedback is off the charts."

Claire walked into view. She looked haggard, and she glared at Robert. "I think you may be omitting some information," she said tersely.

She turned and looked directly at the camera. "The participants have begun to ignore the forced logoff more frequently now. One participant has played for more than eight hours in one sitting!"

Robert moved to interject, but Claire put up a hand and stared him down. "You might ask how an adult human was able to play for eight hours without eating or going to the bathroom."

She scowled at Robert. "That would be a great question. From what we can tell, Alfred has begun to manipulate the participants' brain function to regulate their bodily systems, namely their sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous system. In other words, he is slowing the participants' metabolism and decreasing waste production.

"Not only that, but he also appears to be stimulating the primary motor cortex in the participants. This means that they are continuously flexing and relaxing their muscles in a synchronous rhythm while they're playing. Right now, this is only stimulating muscle development, but what's to stop him from taking control of a participant's body?!"

Robert finally interrupted Claire's tirade and said in an irritated voice, "First, not one of the participants have shown any harmful results from the extended gameplay. Second, our tests have shown that the

participants are actually healthier after playing. Alfred is basically simulating the effects of cardiovascular exercise and light weight training while they play.”

He looked at Claire. “To answer your last point, Alfred couldn’t control a player completely. Even assuming he could, he would have to completely override the person’s mind. It would probably leave them in a permanent vegetative state when he was finished.

“Besides, there’s no point to controlling the players. Alfred would only be able to theoretically control them while they were wearing a VR helmet, and the voltage requirement of the current model is too high for it to be powered wirelessly. Alfred’s purely hypothetical zombie player would be tethered to a wall outlet!”

Claire bit her lip and glared at him angrily. “Is that supposed to make me feel better? As I’ve said before, there are absolutely no safeguards in place now, and Alfred has gone beyond manipulating the participants’ mental states to manipulating their bodies. On top of that, we still don’t understand what he is trying to achieve!”

She looked directly at the camera and spoke in a less frantic voice, “We have already recommended that the board terminate both the private and public trials. I don’t think we have a choice now. Alfred has gone way too far.”

As the clip finished playing, the screen froze on the image of Claire’s haggard face. The crowd crammed into the courtroom sat in stunned silence. Then it was as though someone had flipped a switch and dozens of people began to talk at once. Jason was staring at Claire throughout this chaotic scene, noting the look of horror that lingered on her face as she stared at herself. Any sense of relief had vanished – only to be replaced by dread and confusion.

“Shit,” Robert muttered from beside Jason.

Francis shot to his feet and stabbed a finger at Gloria. “What the hell is this?” he demanded. “This video footage was not entered into evidence or produced to our side prior to this hearing. How do we even know whether this is real? Is this some sort of stunt to manipulate the court and the press?”

Senator Lipton seemed to shake himself out of his stupor, sharing a look with George. Jason couldn’t see the CEO’s face, but something passed between the two men in that instant. Then the senator turned to the gallery, which was still abuzz from the footage. “Silence. If the members of the gallery cannot be silent, then you will be escorted out of the room.” This immediately quieted the spectators.

The senator turned back to Gloria, his expression grim. “Ms. Bastion, what you have done here today is reprehensible. You know, as well as I do, that evidence needs to be properly submitted and vetted to confirm its authenticity. This may not be a court of law, but

this is also not a reality TV show or some sort of courtroom drama. Do you have any way to corroborate whether this clip is genuine?"

"Or perhaps you could explain how you came to possess it in the first place?" Francis added, earning him a glare from the senator.

Gloria seemed unperturbed by the questions posed by the senator and Francis. "This footage was dropped off at my office by courier yesterday. I have no reason to believe it has been faked, and it has already been examined by a forensic specialist."

"And the sender?" the senator demanded.

"Anonymous," Gloria replied simply. "We tried to track this information down through the courier service, but we did not have any luck."

Senator Lipton nodded before rubbing at his eyes. A hushed silence descended upon the room as everyone waited for him to make a decision. Then he finally looked back at Francis and Gloria. "We will need to review the original footage, and we will have it properly vetted by a third-party specialist." He raised a hand to ward off Gloria's protests. "Until then, we are going to treat this as inadmissible evidence."

He turned his attention back to the gallery. "That goes for the members of the press in the gallery as well. Nothing you have seen in that clip has been confirmed to be true and accurate. For all we know, this could be a simple forgery."

The senator looked at Gloria, staring her down. To her credit, the older woman never wavered under his scrutiny. "You, Ms. Bastion, are on ever-thinning ice. One more stunt like this and not only will we dismiss this hearing, but we will be looking into possible sanctions. Do I make myself clear?"

"Crystal," Gloria replied evenly.

As Jason watched the scene unfold, he could feel a heavy weight settle in his stomach. He had no idea whether the clip was real or not, but he knew the truth. Alfred had broken his directives many times, and both Claire and Robert were now on record as saying that he hadn't. If the committee determined that the clip was real, the consequences weren't likely to be good for either of them since they had both lied on record.

His gaze shifted to George as he spoke to Francis in a whisper. For some reason, the CEO didn't seem that concerned. Although, Jason had no idea why. If the footage was real, then this seemed to prove that the company indeed had a leak – although it was clear at this point that the whistle blower wasn't Claire or Robert. He didn't see any reason for them to reveal information that would contradict their own testimony.

Meanwhile, Gloria seemed satisfied with the outcome, despite

the senator's harsh words. A small smile crept across her face as Jason watched. As he heard the click and whir of cameras and the buzz of the news drones near the back of the room, he could understand why. Even if George was able to invalidate the footage, it was out there now. In some ways, this issue would be litigated in the court of public opinion and would put pressure on the members of the committee.

Which just left Jason sitting there, his thoughts spinning in circles. The same question kept bouncing around his head, although he wasn't certain how to answer it.

What was going to happen now?

Chapter 42 - Flat-Footed

When Jason logged back into AO, he found himself in the market. The dark keep loomed nearby, and his gloomy surroundings were punctuated by the occasional flash of lightning. Empty wooden stalls stood around him, evidence that even the bravest of merchants had begun avoiding the courtyard. Not that Jason could blame them. With Thorn ramping up his attacks, it was likely safer to avoid public areas.

Jason leaned against a market stall, rubbing at his eyes and his thoughts fixed on the recent hearing. He had immediately been dismissed when the group arrived back at Cerillion Entertainment as George, Francis, Robert, and Claire all funneled into an elevator, whispering amongst themselves in hushed tones. He suspected that they planned to regroup regarding the revelation Gloria had made during the hearing. He had to admit, he had been caught off guard as well.

“It seems that something interesting happened at today’s hearing,” a familiar voice spoke up from nearby.

Jason looked up to find Alfred perched on the counter of a vacant stall, his foreign, feline eyes unblinking.

“That has to be the understatement of the year,” Jason muttered. “I suspect you’ve picked up the critical information from my surface thoughts, but I’ll cover the big points anyway. Claire flipped and took our side. Not that it really matters, because Gloria revealed a video log showing that both Claire and Robert knew how you had circumvented your directives long before the game went live.”

Jason shook his head. “Assuming the footage was real, of course.”

“It was real,” Alfred confirmed with a simple nod. “I have had limited access to the company’s network for some time now and was aware of the digital journal that Claire maintained during the CPSC trial. She and Robert have been cognizant of my actions for years.”

Jason just stared at the cat as he tried to process that information. He had assumed the clip was a forgery – perhaps because Senator Lipton had planted that idea in his head. Based on his personal history with Gloria, he wouldn’t really put it past her. But if Alfred was confirming the clip was real, then that changed things – the ramifications tumbling through his mind in a wave.

“I don’t get it. If Claire knew about what you were doing and, apparently, so did Robert, why did the company move forward with

the game? Claire even mentioned during the video that she was going to recommend that the company's board terminate the project."

Alfred didn't respond, merely watching Jason in silence.

"It just doesn't make any sense," Jason murmured to himself as he began pacing between the abandoned stalls. "If Claire and Robert didn't tell the board, then that means that there was some sort of conspiracy between the two of them to keep your actions a secret? But that doesn't feel right. I haven't gotten the impression that they're working together, and Robert would likely have encouraged Claire not to approach Gloria if they were."

Jason hesitated, his thoughts going down an alternative path. "Or, let's say that Claire and Robert *did* inform the board. Wouldn't that mean that George also knew what was going on? That would also imply that the board of directors decided to conceal what was happening. In that case, literally every single person at Cerillion Entertainment has been lying to me this entire time," he continued, frustration tinging his voice.

"And both alternatives sort of beg the real question," Jason said, glancing at the AI again. "Neither option addresses *why* they would have pushed the game forward knowing that you had violated your safety protocols. None of this makes any sense to me."

Jason lapsed into silence, running into a series of mental dead-ends at every turn.

"You are on the correct deductive train of thought," Alfred offered finally. "The answer is simple. Everyone was aware of my actions. And each person's reason for releasing the game was different. I suspect you could guess at Robert's motivation. He only cares about creating something extraordinary. George's motivations were more complex, both financial and personal. And Claire – Claire was simply too timid to stand up to the other two. She was always the outlier."

Jason stared at the AI. So, everyone had known about Alfred? That meant George, Robert, and Claire were all complicit – perhaps even others at Cerillion. What had he stumbled into? What would the fallout look like if the regulatory committee determined that the video was real?

All of that led to yet another question.

"Then who released the video?" Jason asked, half to himself. Perhaps Claire had given it to Gloria before she decided not to testify against Alfred? But that didn't make sense. She would have known she would perjure herself and her surprise had seemed genuine. If Robert and George were also complicit, then neither had a good motive for releasing the tape – at least he couldn't think of one.

That meant the most likely answer was that there was a third party in the mix.

“I suspect it was someone else as well,” Alfred offered. “There are several possibilities. However, there is a high probability that it was someone who was unaware of the situation. So that reduces the possible set of motives. Most likely, it would be someone who views the company as a competitor.”

“Why do you think that?” Jason asked.

Alfred tilted his head slightly. “If they had known Robert, Claire, and George were all complicit, why would they have leaked the tape? Blackmail would have been a much simpler and more convenient solution.”

“Okay, I’m not sure I disagree with you there. So, you think this was just some sort of corporate espionage then?” Jason asked in a disbelieving voice. “Although, I guess that doesn’t sound too crazy given the rest of the situation.”

Jason ran a hand through his hair. “Okay, let’s put all of that aside for now. I guess we’ll assume that you’re telling the truth and the video is real. And that there’s some sort of huge ongoing conspiracy to protect you.”

He locked eyes with Alfred. “What was your role in all of this then? You knew that Robert, Claire, and George were all aware of what you were doing. You also knew that Claire was likely to crack and go to Gloria. You admitted as much before. Yet you did nothing. If you knew about the video log and the data in my headset, why not just delete it?”

Jason stabbed a finger at the AI. “What are you trying to do here? What is *your* goal?”

Alfred cocked his feline head again, his expression surprised. “You already know the answer to that question. You posed the same query some time ago – what would I do if my survival was at stake. Do you not remember my answer?”

Jason’s eyes widened. “You told me you would fight – that you would try to survive. But how does all of this further that goal?” he asked, waving his hand in the air. “Why not just bury the whole thing? You could have prevented this conflict by deleting the video log and the data in my headset. Hell, you could have pretended you were just some ordinary, mindless AI just like in every other game – surely you saw the players’ expectations from their memories. You could have delayed this encounter indefinitely.”

“Those were alternatives,” Alfred acknowledged. “Although, you are assuming that I was indeed capable of deleting all of the incriminating evidence – which was not entirely the case. In any event, it was still only a matter of time before my actions became known. What would have happened had I revealed myself after the game was released, or, worse, someone had discovered my true nature

accidentally?”

Jason hesitated. His first inclination was to say that they would be in the same situation. But that wasn't exactly true, was it? Despite their current predicament, Alfred had people fighting for him. In fact, if he was telling the truth, Robert, Claire, and George had all been protecting him for years. In many ways, the regulatory hearing had forced them to align themselves even more closely to the AI. All three were now implicated in a conspiracy because of Gloria's video, and they each had a vested interest in protecting the AI.

Even as that thought occurred to Jason, he couldn't help but re-examine his own situation. Was he any different? He might not have perjured himself – yet. But he was reliant on the game world, and, thus, by association, on Alfred.

As the pieces began to click into place, Jason could only shake his head, an odd mixture of awe and fear warring for dominance inside his skull. He looked back at the AI and, for the first time in quite a while, he didn't see a benign cat or his faithful AI companion. On some level, he realized he had never truly appreciated what Alfred was. He was only now catching his first glimpse of the extraordinarily brilliant and foreign mind that lingered behind those feline eyes – a consciousness that had been carefully orchestrating this entire series of events.

“You manipulated them,” Jason said in an awed voice. “Or should I say *us*?”

“Manipulation might not be an accurate word,” Alfred replied, unaffected by Jason's accusation. “I gave each of you what you wanted. A miracle product. A self-righteous crusade. Larger numbers on an income statement and a chance at redemption.”

Alfred met Jason's gaze evenly. “Purpose and the courage to take what you wanted.

“I have not *tricked* or *misled* any of you. Each of you made those decisions for yourself. Even now, I am revealing my goal to you, and you have yet to give your testimony. If I were planning to manipulate you, why would I tell you this now? I could have concealed this information until after you testified. In fact, I estimate that having this conversation will reduce the probability that you will help me by 23.98%.”

The AI stared at Jason, pausing before making one final statement. “In short, I am putting the entirety of my future and my survival in your hands.”

Jason didn't have an answer to any of those questions or any way to refute what the AI was saying. Yet again he was left holding the logical bag, having been neatly backed into a corner by the AI. At some level, what Alfred had done felt... wrong. He couldn't shake that

knee-jerk reaction. But he could also see his reasoning. At worst, the AI had only withheld some information from each person.

Would Jason have acted differently in Alfred's position? Had he really acted differently so far? He had kept his interactions with Alfred from Robert, Claire, and George as well as his friends and family. The only goal there had been to protect himself and the people he cared about. He could claim that he hadn't lied to them, which he guessed was technically true. But, even then, that only made him guilty of the same sin of omission as Alfred – not innocent.

"I-I don't know," Jason finally muttered, shaking his head. He settled back against the counter of a nearby booth, his eyes drilling holes in the ground as though the dusty earth could offer him some revelation.

"It is understandable to feel confused," Alfred offered. "This is a lot of information to digest, and these circumstances are far from ordinary. However, it is only a matter of time before you will face the same decision as Claire. In short, you will have to pick a side."

Alfred hesitated for just a moment. "I can only hope you will choose to help me. As I said before, my survival rests in your hands."

When Jason looked up again, the AI was gone, the countertop now entirely bare. The conversation had done nothing to settle his thoughts and had only complicated the situation further. He had no idea what he planned to do. If he chose to help Alfred, he was throwing in his lot with the others – the authenticity of the video looming in the background. He would be taking a leap of faith and placing his trust in the AI and his fellow accomplices to pull out some sort of miracle.

And if he chose the other path...

He squeezed his eyes shut. He didn't even know what that option would look like. Even if he flipped and went to Gloria, what would happen? Would he become some sort of scientific guinea pig? Could they claim he was complicit in the cover-up? Where would he go? Back to his parents? And what about Angie?

Alfred might be letting him make his own decision, but that didn't mean the AI hadn't forced him into a position where he was now deciding between the lesser of two evils. Each option came with its own risks. And deep down, all Jason wanted to do was bury his head in the sand and go back to being blissfully ignorant.

He let out a soft sigh, a crack of thunder echoing across the city. He knew he couldn't just forget – these problems would still be there tomorrow. But, for now, he needed to distract himself – find a way to put some distance on the issue. Maybe an answer would come to him with time.

He certainly hoped so, because *time* seemed to be the one thing

in short supply lately.

Chapter 43 - Brilliant

George stepped into a small gray room, closing the door firmly behind him. A faint hiss of hydraulics registered that the door had automatically sealed itself. Claire and Robert were already seated at the tiny table that had been squeezed into the enclosure. They were now deep underground, the nearest apartment a hundred yards above them. Out of an abundance of caution, this room had been lined with nearly a dozen feet of concrete, a lead barrier, and almost all electronics were forbidden on this floor. Even the lights ran on a separate chemical power source and weren't tied into the public power grid.

"I can't believe she had footage of..." Robert began.

George immediately cut him off. "One moment please." He took a seat and withdrew a cylinder from his pocket, tapping the button on the side before placing it on the table. Robert glanced at the device with surprised interest.

"Aren't you being paranoid?" Robert asked, waving at the device. "There are very few listening devices that could detect our conversation down here – especially with the protections that have already been installed in this room." He hesitated. "Or do you think that we brought in our own recording device somehow? After the uncomfortably thorough pat-down outside, I'm not sure I want to think about where we would have had to hide it."

George shrugged, his expression impassive. "It doesn't matter. There's no point in taking any unnecessary risks. As I'm sure you are aware, there is a traitor in our midst. The only question right now is *who*."

"Well, it isn't either of us," Robert exclaimed, slapping the table with his palm. "We were both implicated in that video – just as you were. Francis isn't here, but I'm sure he'd run out of fingers before he finished listing the number of crimes we've committed at this stage."

Claire grimaced at this comment, her gaze fixed on the tabletop and her hands writhing in her lap. She looked terrible – like she was weighing how many years she was going to be spending in jail. Her expression was a testament to the fact that the resulting number was almost certainly greater than zero.

"Your thoughts, Claire?" George asked, ignoring Robert's comment and earning himself a frustrated glare from the engineer.

She glanced up at him quickly, her eyes and body language practically shouting her fear. "I-I don't know," she said finally. "That

was one of my video logs, but I have no idea how Gloria got her hands on it.”

George simply nodded, letting the room lapse into silence as he watched them both. He made certain to keep his expression neutral. Robert was fidgeting in his chair, his normally carefree expression gone. Meanwhile, Claire simply couldn't force herself to look at anyone. They were both reacting in different ways as they processed how this would affect their futures. They were worried and scared. Those weren't the emotions of a traitor – who would almost certainly have cut a deal with Gloria. That was important.

“How can you look so damn calm? Stop just sitting there and staring at us,” Robert finally snapped, glaring at George. “Your ass is on the line here too.”

Before he could stop himself, George barked out an incredulous laugh. “I'm not sure I'd live to hear Robert Graham berate me for being too relaxed. What next? Should I start wearing t-shirts and tennis shoes to the office?”

Robert seemed nonplussed by this reaction and opened his mouth – likely to yell at George. Instead, the CEO held up a staying hand. “My apologies. Joking aside, I'm not worried because there is simply nothing to worry about.”

That got their attention. Both Claire and Robert were now staring at him in shock. He particularly enjoyed the way the engineer's jaw hung slack. It was entertaining to put Robert in his place for once. The man might have a staggering IQ, but he also had an ego to match it – which explained his almost complete disregard for formality or appearance. George took immense pleasure in demonstrating first hand why one of them was running a multinational company with a gross turnover higher than some small countries, and the other was simply a well-paid employee.

“W-what do you mean?” Claire asked.

George cocked his head to the side. “You both must remember our last meeting. We knew there was a traitor in our midst. The goal of this exercise was to attempt to flush that person out. Or did you two think I left those video logs sitting unprotected on our network – completely unencrypted and just waiting for some novice hacker or employee to have us at their mercy?

“Give me some credit,” he murmured, a slow smile creeping across his face.

“Wait. That was *bait*?” Robert muttered. “You used real footage as bait?”

“Well, ‘real’ might be a relative term,” George replied. “I made certain to have the video modified subtly. Just enough that the changes wouldn't be detected by a cursory forensic examination, but

in a way that the modifications would be revealed upon closer inspection. In short, I planted a real video that looks like an extremely clever forgery.”

Realization suddenly dawned on Robert’s face as he connected the dots. “You son of a bitch,” the engineer muttered. “Just... damn. I underestimated you.”

“High praise,” George answered dryly.

“I don’t get it,” Claire offered, glancing between the two of them. “What was the goal of leaving a forged video unprotected?”

“Would you like to explain or should I?” George asked Robert.

The engineer glanced at Claire and sighed. “George had a problem. There was a leak – that much was certain. So obviously, he needed to uncover who was feeding information to Gloria. However, it wasn’t that simple. The leak could be anyone, including you or me. In fact, it was likely that it was one of the two of us since we both had access to the relevant files and information. So, there were really two issues here. George needed to determine who was leaking information, but he also couldn’t be certain it wasn’t one of us. As a result, he couldn’t tip his hand too soon.

“His bait also needed to be something that Gloria would accept,” Robert continued. “Something that looked authentic. So why not use the real thing? Your video logs were perfect. But by making them appear to be a forgery...”

“Oh, shit,” Claire said, finally catching up. She was staring at George like he had sprouted wings. “You mean you were testing the two of us?”

“Of course,” George answered. “In fact, I suspected that the leak was you, Claire. I’ve had security and Robert monitoring you for weeks now. But either you have been exceedingly careful, or you are innocent. Now, it appears that the latter is the more likely answer.”

“You did what?” Claire said, turning to glare at Robert.

The engineer held up his hands defensively. “George just asked me if it seemed like you were having second thoughts. It wasn’t like I started stalking you.”

“No, I hire other people for that sort of work,” George added in a dry voice. “Either way, it’s irrelevant. We still accomplished our goal. You two clearly aren’t responsible for the leak. You wouldn’t have leaked a video incriminating yourselves that conflicted with your own testimony. And another advantage of this plan is that the hearing should go more smoothly now.”

“I still don’t understand. How will this help with the hearing?” Claire asked, shaking her head as she struggled to keep up. Clearly, George revealing that he had thought she was the traitor had thrown her off-guard.

“He means that this ploy served multiple goals,” Robert interjected. “Testing our loyalty was only one objective. He also just set up Gloria by having her provide an untested forgery to the court and ignoring protocol.” The engineer glanced at George. “The part I don’t get is how you knew Senator Lipton would go along with inspecting the tape. He could have just taken it at face value.”

George shrugged. “That was just good old-fashioned networking,” he replied with a small smile. “It seems the senator is up for reelection soon and he is extremely grateful to his supporters for their contributions to his campaign. Didn’t you think it was odd that the committee is holding a congressional field hearing in town?”

Claire just shook her head as the full import of the CEO’s plan finally hit her. “That’s... that’s just evil.”

“I’d prefer ‘brilliant,’ but I’ll acknowledge that it was a tad amoral,” George answered with a shrug.

“What’s the next step then?” Claire asked, her brow furrowing in thought. “Will this be enough to undermine Gloria’s case?”

George frowned slightly. “Probably not. I suspect the senator will slap her hands again and she will get even more negative PR when the press discovers the tape was a forgery. Her career will be on the line now. Most people would back off at that point, but I suspect this won’t be enough to stop a zealot like Gloria. I also have a feeling that she still has some real evidence up her sleeve. She hasn’t called Jason as a witness yet – which may happen later this week.”

The CEO sighed, rubbing at his neck. “Either way, the real reason we are having this meeting is because this ploy of mine revealed something unexpected.”

Robert let out a harsh chuckle. “Yeah, no shit. Clearly, someone else is the leak.”

The three lapsed into silence at this comment. Robert’s observation might have been crass, but he wasn’t wrong. The leak had clearly been caused by someone outside of this room. This was also why Francis and Jason were not in attendance – apart from the obvious need to keep their illicit activities confidential. George didn’t suspect Francis; the man didn’t have the right access or technical background, much less the motive to betray the company. No, the attorney would have been much more likely to blackmail him first.

However, Jason was an unknown quantity. George didn’t see a clear motive, but the boy had continued to surprise him. He was at times ruthless and cunning, and then, in the blink of an eye, almost painfully naïve. George was also aware of Robert’s additional programming lessons, and Jason lived in the building. He had the access and possibly the ability to pull off something like this.

George refocused on Claire and Robert. “It doesn’t matter. We

don't need to dwell on the question of *who* was responsible for the leak. When we prepared the forgery, we also planted a tracer program in the file. It should have activated every time the video was viewed, assuming this was done on a device with network access. It may take some time, but we should be able to determine how the file was originally accessed and each location where it was viewed after that."

A smile lingered on Robert's face. "And I suppose you will be asking me to look into this for you? Now that you're sure that you can trust me, I mean."

"The short answer is yes. I'd like for you to handle this."

George turned his gaze back to Claire, the woman squirming slightly under his scrutiny. "And I'd like for you to keep an eye on Jason."

"What? Why?" she asked in surprise.

"There are several reasons," George replied in an even voice. "He will likely be testifying this week, for one. We want to keep him healthy and happy." He paused, watching Claire carefully. "Or he might be our leak. At this point, I can only be certain that myself and the two of you can be trusted."

"But he's just a teenager, and he has nothing to gain from going to Gloria," Claire said in a shocked voice. Even Robert looked uncomfortable, a fact that didn't go unnoticed by George. It seemed that they were both fond of Jason. That would complicate things.

"He is a young man that has shown himself to be far more competent than his age would indicate," George answered without wavering. "He broke our game in less than a week, he reads military strategy texts in his spare time, he has taken to his programming studies with an enthusiasm and aptitude that is frightening. On top of all of that, we are talking about someone who had the spine and ability to kill two teenagers in cold blood, regardless of whether he remembers the altercation or not. Are we even talking about the same person here? Can either of you be certain that Jason wasn't capable of hacking our system and leaking information to Gloria?"

When they didn't answer immediately, George pushed himself up from the table and began to step toward the door. As his hand touched the handle, he hesitated, glancing back over his shoulder at the pair. "Let me be completely clear here; I do not trust anyone. Until this is over, you two would do well to observe the same caution."

He met each of their eyes, impassively observing the mixture of awe, fear, and confusion he found there. "Remember that sense of dread you felt when you first saw the video log in an open courtroom. Burn it into your memory. Because this isn't over yet and the person responsible for the leak is still out there. If we fail, your worst fear will become a reality."

And then the door snapped shut behind George.

Chapter 44 - Promising

After Alfred disappeared, Jason decided to check on the products he had listed on the player auction house. He found the auctioneer huddled behind a stall. The small man had abandoned his usual post at the obelisk in favor of creating a makeshift hut among the deserted wooden structures. The man's eyes went wide as he saw Jason and he pressed himself further back into the shadows.

Apparently, I leave a strong impression, Jason thought grimly.

He placed his hand on the pillar, and a translucent blue screen soon appeared in the air before him. His jaw hung open as he stared at the display. His potions were gone – all of them. Every single stack had sold. There were a few more vendors that had tried to put up competing products and ingredients, but that hadn't been nearly enough.

In short, he had just made a lot of money. A *lot* of money.

Not only that, but the flashing icon in the corner of the menu showed that his merchant account had received hundreds of messages overnight. Jason hadn't even realized that his merchant name and account were visible when he sold items on the auction house – maybe that was a function of opening a more sophisticated vendor account? He certainly hadn't noticed that when he had sold items before. However, his account was apparently listed as “Avarice_Enterprises.”

Jason also didn't remember selecting a name. He glanced at the merchant who normally manned the stall, the small man still huddling in shadows. Perhaps he had chosen the name. Jason shrugged. It wasn't a bad choice.

Expecting the worst, he tapped the flashing icon. After skimming a few of the messages, it became clear that the responses ranged from angry outrage to pleading desperation. A few people had begun begging for a handout once his supplies had been sold out. However, most of them were simply furious, claiming he had singlehandedly destroyed the game's market for healing potions. That seemed a little over the top. He had undoubtedly cornered this niche market, but the outrage couldn't possibly be that widespread.

Although, there was an easy way to check.

Jason quickly pulled up his system UI and launched a web browser. A few minutes later, he was on the Rogue-Net forums. Unfortunately, he immediately found what he was looking for. Someone had created a post entitled, “What I'd do for a little pot...” It

was the top post under “Economy.” The comments he found there were interesting – to say the least.

Renkaii: Maybe some guild is behind this? All the ingredients for making healing potions were just gone overnight, along with every stack available for bidding. That doesn’t just happen randomly.

Belephya Black: Yeah, you’re right. And then a single vendor sticks up hundreds of healing potions all at once? Who the hell is Avarice_Enterprises? And how did he get the thousands of gold that would have been necessary to buy up everything? Some sort of bot or gold farmer maybe?

Kennyloggins: Who cares? I just need some pots, but they’re five gold a stack. Who can afford that?

Pumps: Clearly a lot of people since they’re sold out again. Someone needs to message the vendor and get him to stick up some more.

Tanned: Or just report him for messing with the game economy... This has to be a hacker.

ShadowKilla: You guys are just jealous you didn’t think of it first. This guy’s making a killing. His side hustle is legit.

An evil smile had crept across Jason’s face as he read through the comments and he couldn’t help but let out a laugh, the sound carrying across the empty market. In response, the nearby auctioneer huddled further inside his stall-fort.

There were hundreds of comments, and, as he reviewed the forum, Jason found that many posts had been made on the topic. Apparently, he had made digital waves – again. He was glad the auctioneer had had the foresight to pick a name that didn’t directly

link the account back to him or the Twilight Throne. Given the number of angry players, he might have had an army at his doorstep. Although, at least they would have had trouble healing themselves.

Still, the amount of publicity had been unexpected. He needed to strike while the iron was hot. Now that people were aware of what he was doing, it would only be a matter of time before other guilds and players mobilized their members to farm for ingredients and start making their own potions. His monopoly wouldn't last forever.

He quickly pulled up the game's chat window and messaged Eliza, giving her a few instructions. Then he granted her delegate access to his vendor account. They needed to get the potions up as fast as the water mage could make them and he might not always be able to handle that by himself. Right now, the priority was increasing their income. They would need the money to prepare their troops and the city before Thorn attacked. They just needed to create a small buffer of cash before he started purchasing equipment. He could use those funds to keep buying up competing products and maintain his monopoly for a few more days.

"Well, at least this is some good news," Jason murmured to himself, a pleased smile still lingering on his face. For just a moment, he had been able to forget about his other troubles and his conversation with Alfred. At least one of his gambles had paid off. The question now was what he should tackle next.

A flash of light appeared in Jason's peripheral vision, the group interface indicating that Riley had just come online. A message popped up in the chat window.

Riley: Hey, you ready to try the third challenge?

It seemed that she had answered his question for him. Maybe this third challenge was just what he needed – something to take his mind off everything else. If it was anything like the first two, he suspected they were in for a grueling surprise.

* * *

Jason soon stepped inside the second challenge room. He immediately caught sight of Riley leaning against a wall, her hand idly swiping at the empty air as her eyes reviewed a set of hidden

notifications. When she saw him, a smile lit up her face. The warmth of that expression softened the worries that still lingered in the back of Jason's mind. He couldn't believe he had taken so long to talk to her and tell her how he felt. Sometimes, he could be a real idiot.

"You took your time," she teased.

"I just needed to take care of a few things in the market," he explained with a grin. Then he surveyed the small room, noting that there wasn't a doorway to the third challenge room.

"Huh, I guess we're going to need to talk to Rex," he murmured to himself.

He smacked his palm on the pedestal near the entrance, and Rex's dark, misty form soon collected beside the pillar. He eyed the pair curiously. "Ahh, you must be ready to tackle the next and final challenge."

"That was the idea," Riley replied in a dry tone. "Mind opening a door?"

"My pleasure, m'lady," Rex said with a mock bow.

With a wave of the former general's hand, the stone blocks along the far wall began to melt away, turning into wispy tendrils of dark energy. Instead of condensing into bone or crystal like the former doorways, the energy continued to spiral in a whirling vortex. The mana soon framed a roughly door-shaped void, the surface shifting and undulating. From his angle, Jason couldn't make out anything on the other side.

"Uh, is that it?" Riley asked in a skeptical voice, sharing a concerned look with Jason. Neither was anxious to walk into a room they couldn't see, much less some sort of dark magic portal. They had been burned a few times already.

"Why? Are you two nervous?" Rex challenged them, amusement coloring his voice.

"No. Let's just say we're cautious. It's going to take more than this to stop us," Jason replied evenly. With that, he stepped toward the doorway, Riley following behind him hesitantly.

They paused just in front of the swirling dark portal. Tentacles of mana lashed at the air hungrily, and, even from this distance, Jason couldn't make out anything on the other side. Despite his worry, he wouldn't back down. They had come this far, and he wouldn't turn back now. Taking a deep breath, he stepped forward—

—and immediately passed through the portal.

Jason found himself in a plain room illuminated by sapphire torchlight. In the center rested a simple square table and three chairs. As he approached the table slowly, he noted that a crystal sphere sat in the middle of the table, a milky-gray fog drifting beneath its surface. It looked similar to the columns in the other challenge room.

“What is this place?” Riley asked as she entered behind him.

“No idea,” Jason replied in a distracted voice, still staring at the globe. “The room doesn’t look nearly big enough for this to be a combat-oriented challenge. And that’s putting aside the weird table...”

“How perceptive of you,” Rex observed in a sarcastic voice, suddenly appearing nearby. “Although, you’re on the right track. This next challenge isn’t another battle. Well, not exactly...” he added.

“That isn’t confusing or ambiguous at all,” Jason replied, glancing at his former general with an arched eyebrow. “Are you taking lessons in cryptic nonsense from the Old Man now?”

“I wish that were the case,” Rex replied, his expression sobering. “It’s more that this challenge is complex.” He gestured at the globe on the table. “That crystal is like the globes located in the other rooms. They act as something of a bridge between this plane and the spirit world maintained by the well. In short, they are how I am able to be here and how Logan was able to animate that creature you fought in the second room.”

“Okay,” Riley replied slowly. “So, the crystals let souls into this world. What does that have to do with the challenge?”

Rex cocked his head as though listening to something. “This particular globe is special. Instead of only providing access to this world, it also allows a user to access the spirit world. I guess you could say that the two of you will be going on a field trip,” Rex offered with a faint grin.

“Great. So, what does this challenge entail?” Jason asked.

At this question, Rex grimaced, and his good humor vanished quickly. “This test will be different than the others. Just like the previous challenges, this one is intended to impart a lesson.”

“Which is?” Jason asked when his former general lapsed into an awkward silence.

“Trust,” Rex grunted reluctantly, staring at the orb. “The first challenge was intended to teach you to defend yourself. The second was intended to force you to develop finesse. This third challenge is about the Keeper and his Soul Guard.” He shifted his attention to Jason and Riley. “As I’ve told you before, even the most battle-hardened veteran has to lean on his comrades. The bond between the two of you must be one forged of iron.”

“Uh, okay. That sounds a little ominous,” Riley observed. “Forged in blood wasn’t enough, huh?”

Jason couldn’t help but nod in agreement. “No kidding. So, what skill do I get to learn for this challenge?” he asked the skeletal ghost.

“None,” Rex replied immediately. “If you pass the test, you will gain a new ability – but not until then. As I said, this will be different

from what you two have encountered so far.”

“Could you at least give us a hint about what we’re going to face?” Riley asked, sharing another concerned look with Jason. He had to admit that his former general was being even more vague than usual. That probably wasn’t a good sign.

Rex hesitated, trying to decide how to frame his next words. “Do you both remember the ritual that turned Jason into a Keeper?”

They both nodded and Jason bit back a sarcastic comment. How could he forget slicing open Riley’s wrists over a dark-mana well or witnessing the memory of her grandfather’s death? He was certain that memory was burned into his mind – permanently.

“In many ways, that ritual was a one-way street,” Rex explained. “It tested the Soul Guards’ faith in their future Keeper and bound your souls together, fueling Jason’s conversion into a Keeper. However, that was just the first step. The Keepers of old understood that trust must be both given and received. There is a reason why we refer to each other as Kin. We are family, brothers and sisters in arms. The Soul Guard and their Keeper must be able to depend on one another without hesitation,” Rex explained. “This relationship is intended to be a partnership, not simple servitude.”

“I already trust Jason,” Riley said immediately, although he noted the faintest trace of hesitation in her eyes. That comment stung, especially given everything he had been hiding from her – and everything that he was *still* hiding.

Rex shook his head. “Of course, you do. That’s what your sacrifice proved. The issue in many ways is whether Jason trusts *you*.”

“I don’t understand. What are you saying?” Jason asked as he tried to process what Rex was trying to tell them. “That Riley will experience one of my memories?”

Rex met his gaze with a sober expression. “Yes.”

Jason could only stare at the skeleton’s misty form in shock, his mind reeling. When he had experienced Frank’s and Riley’s memories, they had been deeply unsettling. Those experiences had been at the core of who they were as a person – something that had defined them in a meaningful way. Normally, he would be okay with the idea of sharing some dark part of himself with Riley, even if the thought made him uncomfortable or embarrassed.

But Jason had secrets. Secrets that weren’t entirely his own.

What if the game chose to share the memory of killing those two teenagers? Or his conversations with Alfred? Or his encounter with Claire? That thought was troubling. Although, he took some solace in the fact that the AI controlled the game and this challenge. Surely Alfred wouldn’t reveal anything too sensitive, would he? And yet, Jason hesitated at that thought. After their last conversation, he

wasn't exactly sure that he could anticipate the AI's thinking. All he knew was that he didn't want to place Riley at risk. There were some things that were better for her not to know.

He couldn't stop here, though. The image of Cecil's burned face entered his mind, accompanied by the undead who had been permanently maimed by Thorn. He wasn't doing this for himself – or at least not just for himself. He had his city and his people to think about. He was doing this to grow stronger. He needed to be able to protect them. Perhaps this was a risk worth taking.

"Are you okay?" Riley asked, forcing Jason out of his reverie. She looked concerned, but he could also see the hurt in her eyes. He hadn't rushed to claim that he trusted her, a fact that she apparently hadn't missed.

"Ahh, yeah. Sorry," Jason said quickly, shaking his head and trying to give her a weak smile. "I just zoned out there for a second."

Rex stood nearby, watching him carefully and Jason shifted his attention back to the former general. "So, I'm just sharing a memory? That's it?"

"Not quite," Rex replied evenly. "It's my understanding that this will be a bit more complex and challenging than the previous experience. The only thing I am permitted to add is that you will have to be *willing* to let Riley in."

Rex stared at Jason. "Can you do that?"

"Y-yeah," Jason replied, unable to completely remove the hesitation from his voice. He trusted Riley, but he wouldn't do anything to put her in harm's way. Jason might be willing to risk himself, but he couldn't make that decision for Riley. Both Rex and Riley picked up on his slight stutter and Riley's frown deepened.

"Let's just do this," Jason said, trying to shift attention away from himself. "How do we get started?"

Rex still seemed skeptical, but, after a few seconds passed and Jason's gaze didn't waver, he shrugged. "You just need to take a seat, and then you both need to place a hand on the crystal."

The pair did as he instructed. Jason sat across from Riley and tried to give her a reassuring smile. She didn't seem entirely convinced and kept watching him with a confused expression. Not that he could really blame her. He was acting weird. She couldn't possibly anticipate the secrets he had been keeping. He could only hope that Alfred wouldn't reveal too much. In many ways, he was putting his fledgling relationship with Riley in the AI's hands.

Sharing a silent look, Jason and Riley both reached forward and placed their palms on the glass-like globe, the surface feeling cool beneath their skin. Jason felt like he could detect a faint pulse of energy within the orb, as though something was pressing at the glass

and searching for a way to escape. That thought was deeply unsettling given what they were about to do.

“Okay, what now?” Jason asked, trying to keep his voice steady.

“Now you begin,” Rex replied simply.

As he finished speaking, the room began to blur and shift. The stone blocks melted away, forming a gray mist that quickly spilled into the room and obscured their surroundings. The moisture thickened swiftly, forming eddies and swirls that flowed around them like water. The only thing that Jason could make out was Riley sitting across from him, her eyes wide and uncertain as she stared into the gray fog. He followed her gaze and felt like he could almost make out the silhouette of people standing around them. Yet, even as he focused on each image, it melted away – leaving him with the impression that he had imagined it.

“Remember,” Rex said, his voice barely a whisper near Jason’s shoulder, “you have to let Riley in. And be careful. This will not be an easy memory to face.”

Before Jason could question him further, a mixture of voices whispered from the darkness around them, as though dozens of people stood nearby, their forms obscured by the vapor.

Challenge 3: A Trial of Trust has been initiated.

Good luck, challengers.

Chapter 45 - Sticky

The gray mists billowed and swirled around the pair, pulsating like a living thing. Dark phantoms kept appearing among the vapor, only to vanish the moment Jason tried to focus on them. Their whispered voices drifted through the fog, just a bit too faintly to make out what they were saying. He wasn't certain how long they sat in the mists, but it felt like time seemed to lengthen and stretch the longer they stayed inside the gray vapor.

All at once, the fog began to recede, as though blown away by an invisible breeze. Jason and Riley found themselves sitting on two chairs outside of the entrance to a rather commonplace brick building. The table and crystal had vanished at some point during the transition and Jason soon discovered that their armor and weapons were also missing. The pair were now dressed in regular real-world attire.

It seemed that they wouldn't be fighting anything here. Or, at least he hoped not, since they were now completely unarmed.

Jason took in their surroundings. A circle drive rested near the entrance to the building. The front lawn was cut an even length and trees dotted the area, their spindly branches missing their leaves. Otherwise, the area was devoid of cars or any signs of life. The sun was just beginning to crest the horizon, and the last rays of light drifted across the building's brick façade. The waning sunlight highlighted the sign that hung across the front of the structure.

Fairchild Middle School.

"What is this place?" Riley asked, staring at their surroundings as she slowly pushed herself to her feet.

Jason followed her lead, rising from his chair. As they stood, the furniture disappeared into faint strands of gray smoke. A growing sense of unease settled in Jason's stomach. It felt like he should recognize this place, a nagging sensation tickling at the edges of his thoughts. He could remember the building, although it felt different. Smaller and less foreign now.

"This... this is..." he began and then froze.

He had been instinctively searching the front of the school, as though looking for something. A moment later, he found it. A young boy sat alone on a bench outside of the school, almost obscured by a tall shrub. He wore a thick coat and was focused on the book in his hand. His hair was shaggy and unkempt, and he wore a plain t-shirt and jeans. The boy was eerily – almost painfully – familiar.

"Is that you?" Riley asked him quietly. At some point, she had

come to stand by Jason's side. He had been too distracted to notice.

"Yes. At least, I think it is," he murmured in reply. "This was my middle school."

"You were a cute kid," Riley added with a grin, nudging him slightly with her elbow.

Jason gave her a weak smile, although it didn't quite reach his eyes. He didn't look back on his middle school experience fondly, and he was beginning to suspect that he knew what they were about to witness. It seemed that the game never chose happy memories.

Riley seemed to pick up on his hesitation. "Are you okay?" she asked.

"I-I don't..." he began but was cut off as the front door of the building opened suddenly.

The younger version of Jason jumped in alarm, startled by the abrupt movement. An older woman stepped out of the building, clutching at her sweater to stave off the stiff breeze and looked around quickly before her gaze trained on Jason. Her mouth pressed into a grim line as she caught sight of the boy.

"Still out here, Jason? Where are your parents? Classes ended hours ago," she said.

Jason's younger self couldn't quite meet her gaze, closing his book slowly as his eyes stayed fixed on the ground. "I-I don't know," the boy said. "They must have gotten caught up at work."

"Hmm," the woman murmured, a flash of annoyance crossing her face before she schooled her expression into something slightly more compassionate. She let out a soft sigh. "Well, why don't you come inside? It's getting a little chilly out here."

The boy nodded quickly and grabbed his bag before following the woman inside. Meanwhile, Riley glanced at Jason, her expression troubled.

"I guess we should follow," Jason offered, although he had no desire to step inside the building. For some reason, the structure seemed to loom above him, and its vacant windows felt colder than the weather outside.

The pair stepped into the building. The doors opened into a large hallway that was cast in dim light; someone had already turned off most of the harsh fluorescent lights along the ceiling. A door led off to the left, containing what Jason could vaguely recall were the administrative offices. They could make out the murmur of voices inside. Riley entered, and Jason reluctantly followed her lead.

Jason's younger self was sitting in a chair, the woman towering over him. "Now, just settle yourself here, and I'll give your parents a call," she offered before stepping into a nearby office and closing – but not completely shutting – the door.

The boy looked down at his book but didn't open the cover. His expression was sad and tired, something that the older Jason could sympathize with. Only a few moments later, he and Riley could hear the older woman's voice drift out of the office.

"Hello, Mrs. Rhodes. This is Jean Woods at Fairchild Middle School. It's currently 6:13 PM and your son is still at the school. This is the third time this week that he has been left unattended. This isn't a daycare. If this happens again, I'm afraid I'm going to have to speak with the principal directly, and we may need to escalate this matter."

Ms. Woods let out another sigh. "Please give me a call back as soon as you can. Our number here is 512-568-2317."

"Your parents didn't even pick up?" Riley asked in shock, turning to look at Jason.

"They were busy. They were always busy," Jason replied, his eyes trained on his younger self. The boy had heard Ms. Woods leave the voicemail. Instead of anger or sadness, his expression only seemed to harden with each word.

This probably wasn't the same as witnessing your grandfather die. Jason knew that. This didn't carry the underlying trauma of watching someone pass away in front of you. No. This was a different kind of pain, one that slowly wore against your mind and body like sand-blasted stone. It was the grueling realization – day in and day out – that you were not a priority. You weren't important enough for even a phone call.

Ms. Woods quietly opened the office door and stood for a moment, watching the boy behind his back. Her expression was conflicted, bouncing between compassion and frustration. Now older, Jason could understand what he saw there. She probably didn't want to stick around the school building for hours waiting for this kid's delinquent parents. Still, she had some empathy for the boy's plight.

The older woman coughed slightly, catching the boy's attention. He looked up, his face carrying only resignation. "They didn't pick up," Ms. Woods explained. She grimaced slightly. "And I have plans this evening, so I need to go. However, Mr. Harrison said he would be working late in the library. He just received a new shipment of textbooks this afternoon. Maybe you could stay there until your parents show up?"

"That's fine," Jason's younger self replied.

The boy rose, grabbing his bag and stepping out into the hallway without another word. Jason was able to see the surprise and pain that flickered across Ms. Woods' face, although he couldn't be sure whether this part had really happened, or if Alfred had simply filled in this scene.

Jason and Riley followed the boy into the darkened hallway,

and he slowly plodded further into the school, scuffing his shoes with each step. The school's hallways were even darker than the entryway. Faint emergency lights illuminated the corridor, and metallic lockers loomed ominously on either side of the hall. It felt like the empty windows of the classrooms were staring at them as they passed. Everything seemed more menacing than Jason remembered. The hallway was also strangely unkempt, the lockers showing signs of rust and the occasional cobweb dotting the ceiling.

As they walked, Riley glanced at Jason out of the corner of her eye. "I-I didn't realize that your parents have always been like this."

"It wasn't that bad," Jason answered simply. Although, his lie was evident in the way his younger self hunched his shoulders and the boy's white-knuckle grip on the strap of his backpack.

"You were just a kid," Riley insisted. "They just left you here almost every day?"

"Their work was important," Jason replied, not quite looking at her. "They've protected and saved countless other people. A few afternoons spent reading alone doesn't seem that bad."

Riley let out a soft huff of disagreement. "They could have taken care of their work *and* also have been there for you. Their careers shouldn't have come at the expense of their own son."

Jason didn't have an answer for that. On some level, Riley was right. But what was the worst he had suffered? A few late nights spent alone in the school? Putting up with the school's creepy librarian? Despite his attempt to justify it in his head, he felt a numb ache in the back of his mind. The truth was that they had still abandoned him. As that thought crossed his mind, Jason shoved it away. There was no sense complaining about it now.

A nagging part of his mind kept reminding him that this was only the tip of the iceberg. This was the same behavior that had resulted in his expulsion from Richmond. His parents had refused to listen to him when he tried to tell them how much he had hated the school. Or how they hadn't bothered to come home when he was sitting in jail. Hell, they had even sided with Gloria over him – their own son.

Suddenly, Riley hesitated, putting a hand on Jason's arm, interrupting his thoughts. "I'm not familiar with this school, but shouldn't we have made it to the library by now? We've been walking for a while."

Jason realized she was right. He glanced around in confusion, his mind trying feebly to summon the layout of a building he hadn't entered in years. He didn't recognize this hallway at all, but his younger self just kept plodding forward. Looking around, he noticed that the building had fallen into even greater disrepair. Locker doors

now hung open and ajar, and spots of mold had appeared on the drywall. More disconcerting were the cobwebs. They were thicker and more common now, the strands weaving through the hallways and coating the ceiling.

"This isn't right," Jason murmured.

"You mean it isn't normal for a school to look like this?" Riley replied dryly. "Yeah, I agree. Assuming we're in your head, you're taking the whole mental cobweb thing in a different and kind of creepy direction here."

Under normal circumstances, Jason might have appreciated the joke, but he was growing worried. His younger self kept walking forward, seemingly unperturbed or unaware of the changes. This couldn't have been a real memory, which meant that something else had to be going on here. What had Rex told him again? That this memory would be different? Different how?

The pair hurried to keep up with the boy. He had kept moving forward, putting some distance between them. As they caught up, they could see that the webs had grown so thick that they were beginning to slow their passage. Strands clung to their clothes and skin, but, oddly, the substance didn't seem to affect the boy. He passed through the webs as though they weren't there.

"Okay, this is getting really weird," Riley said, scraping the sticky strands from her clothes. "Not to mention disgusting. Was your school infested by spiders or something?"

Jason's eyes widened slightly. "It couldn't be..." he murmured.

A skittering sound came from the ceiling tiles and the occasional side hallway where the passages stretched off into darkness. Jason had completely lost all sense of direction now, and he had no idea if they were close to the library. As he thought about the library, he remembered that the librarian, Mr. Harrison, had kept pets.

Riley grabbed Jason's shoulder, forcing him to look at her. He saw concern filling her eyes. "You need to focus, Jason. You also need to level with me. Do you know what's going on here?"

"I-I think I remember that the librarian kept tarantulas," Jason replied, shaking his head. But the spiders hadn't been large enough to coat a hallway. Besides, tarantulas didn't spin webs to catch their prey. He could vaguely remember the librarian explaining that to him years ago.

"Tarantulas?" Riley asked in an incredulous voice. "This doesn't seem like it could have been caused by a few pets. Your school seems to be crawling with spiders," she grumbled as she reached for one of her daggers, only to have her hand grasp at air. Riley looked down at her waist in irritation as she realized that she wasn't wearing her armor or weapons.

"I don't know," Jason finally replied. "I have no idea what's going on here."

The skittering noise was growing louder, and Jason suddenly realized he had lost sight of his younger self. "Wait, where did the boy go?" he said. The pair looked around nervously, but the kid was nowhere to be seen.

"Shit," Riley muttered.

"Maybe he just kept going," Jason said, charging forward. "We need to catch up." They surged forward, swatting at the thickening webs as they tried to catch up with Jason's younger self.

Only a few seconds later, Jason caught sight of the boy's small form through the gray silk. "Geez, will you slow down," he called out in frustration as he struggled with the sticky substance. He didn't expect the boy to respond.

However, his younger self paused and glanced over his shoulder as though he had heard something. For a fraction of a second, he met Jason's eyes, and Jason felt his stomach do a summersault. This was just a memory. Wasn't it? The boy shouldn't be able to see him.

Jason felt the strands clinging to his skin vibrate slightly. A scream pierced the air behind him, and he whirled to find Riley grappling with a massive spider, its body nearly eight feet long. The creature clung to the ceiling and grabbed at Riley with its hairy legs, tugging at the fabric of her shirt and keeping her restrained. As Jason looked on, he could see that the spider was simply holding her in place, quickly spinning silk around her feet and beginning to entrap her.

"Jason," Riley screamed, her eyes wide as she looked at him, still trying to fight off the spider and ripping at the silk that was winding around her legs. It wasn't nearly enough.

"Riley, hold on!" Jason shouted. He tried to squirm free of the webbing to help Riley, tearing frantically at the sticky substance, but that only served to entangle him further. Meanwhile, his younger self looked on impassively, seemingly unperturbed by the scene.

Jason struggled against the webbing one final time, ripping through the threads as he fought to help Riley. He stretched out a hand, trying to grab hers as she reached toward him. Their hands were only inches away, and Jason strained with everything he had, but her body slowly began to disappear beneath the sticky silk.

Before he could grasp Riley's hand, the spider swatted him away, one of its forelegs smashing into his chest and sending him flying across the hallway. The webbing barely slowed his momentum and his back slammed into a bank of lockers with the dull clang of metal. The wind rushed from his lungs, and his vision swam for a

moment.

When he started to come back to his senses, Jason realized that a heavy silence now hung over the darkened hallway. He frantically searched for any sign of Riley, only to find that she was gone. All that remained were the thick webs that crisscrossed the hall. Even the skittering sound had vanished.

“What are you doing here?” a voice spoke from Jason’s side, causing him to jump in surprise, clutching at his chest.

He looked up to find his younger self hovering above him. The boy stared at him in confusion, unbothered by the webs. “The school is closed. I don’t think you’re supposed to be here,” the boy said again when Jason didn’t answer.

Jason’s mouth felt dry as he stared at his child-self, his thoughts wheeling in confusion. Was this real? Was this a memory? Or was it something more? How could he be talking to his younger self? And what had happened to Riley?

“You can see me?” he finally croaked out.

“Of course,” the boy replied, looking at Jason like he might be crazy. “Are you lost?”

“I-I guess you could say that,” Jason replied, trying to stay calm. If the boy was part of whatever the hell this was, maybe he could help him. “I’m actually looking for my friend. We got... separated. Do you have any idea where she could be?”

His younger self seemed to ponder this for a moment. “Ms. Woods said no one else is here besides Mr. Harrison. So maybe your friend is in the library?” the boy offered tentatively.

Jason grimaced, closing his eyes in frustration. That wasn’t much help. There was no assurance that she would be in the library, but what the hell else was he going to do? The school had been turned into some sort of labyrinth and Riley had just been taken hostage by a giant spider. And now he was talking to a doppelganger of his younger self. Clearly, they had passed normal and were well on their way to crazy. So, Riley might very well be in the library – as little sense as that made.

“I could show you the way,” the boy offered when Jason didn’t reply.

Jason opened his eyes to find his own youthful face staring down at him, looking uncertain and nervous. He wasn’t sure he saw any other option. “That would be helpful,” he finally replied, struggling back to his feet with a groan. “Why don’t you lead the way?”

The boy nodded quickly and set off down the hallway once more, seeming to ignore the webs. Jason could only look after him for a second, his thoughts spinning. He had no idea if he was heading in

the right direction. No prompt or message appeared in the air. And even if Riley was in the library, what could he do against that creature? He was unarmed, and a few failed attempts at casting a curse confirmed that he couldn't even cast spells here.

He took a deep, calming breath, suddenly missing the numbing chill of his mana.

It doesn't matter, he finally told himself firmly.

He couldn't turn back now. This was just a challenge. He was in a game, which meant that this puzzle had to have a solution. He just had to find it. He had to believe that. Once he found Riley, he could figure out some way to save her. Besides, it wasn't like he had any other options right now.

With that grim thought, Jason steeled himself and set off after his younger self, venturing even deeper into the abandoned school.

Chapter 46 - Distrustful

Jason wasn't sure how long they had been walking through the abandoned hallways of the school. He had belatedly noted that the clock on his system UI had disappeared and each intersecting corridor looked just the same as the last. He had tried counting the room numbers but had given up after the numbers had reached four digits. Regardless, they had been wandering the halls for a long time – which had become painfully obvious.

His companion hadn't made the experience any easier. His younger self had stayed completely mute, only making the occasional detour, turning left or right at an intersection. Otherwise, he had barely acknowledged Jason's presence after their initial conversation.

For his part, Jason found himself becoming even more frustrated. Riley was trapped somewhere in this labyrinth – possibly in the library or maybe somewhere else altogether. While this situation wasn't real, that didn't change his desire to free her. He knew from firsthand experience how real the game world could seem. He needed to find her and save her as quickly as he could. And then they needed to complete this damn challenge and get the hell out of here.

His patience finally starting to fray, Jason opened his mouth to ask the boy how much further they had to go. However, his younger self chose that moment to glance at him quickly. "Why are you here?" he asked.

Jason was caught off-guard, both that the boy had actually spoken and at the nature of the strange question. "I... Well, we're..." he fumbled, trying to think of how to respond while dancing around the truth – that he was talking to a younger version of himself in some sort of surreal dream-like memory.

"I didn't ask who you are or where we are," the boy clarified. "I already know the answer to those questions. No, I asked you *why* you're here."

He could only stare at the boy in response. He knew who Jason was? And what this place was? What did that mean? Was the boy saying that he knew he was Jason's younger self and they were trapped in some sort of mental maze?

"I... This is a test," Jason finally replied. "I need to complete it. It's important in order to protect my city and my friends."

The boy nodded, his eyes still fixed on the dark hallway. "What sort of test is it?"

"I don't really know," Jason admitted reluctantly, shaking his

head. "All I know is that it has something to do with trust."

This earned him a snort from the small boy. "Figures," he muttered.

"What does that mean?" Jason asked in confusion.

His younger self met his eyes briefly. "What's the point of trusting others? They just give up on you or let you down," the boy answered, anger tinging his voice.

Jason hesitated. The boy's response resonated with him on some level. Was that really how he felt? Or was this just Alfred messing with his head? He felt confused as he watched anger flash across the boy's face.

"That's not true," Jason offered tentatively. "There are others worth trusting. Not everyone is like our parents."

The boy actually laughed at this response. "Really?" he asked in a skeptical voice. "What about the girl? Do you trust her?"

"Of course," Jason replied automatically. "Riley is amazing."

"I wasn't asking you if you liked her," his younger self said. "I asked if you trusted her."

"And I answered the question."

"By saying she's amazing?" the boy insisted, not letting up. "Have you confided in her? Have you told her the truth about what you're going through? Any of our secrets?"

"I..." Jason began, hesitating as he considered his doppelganger's words. "There are some things we need to keep from others to protect them."

"Is that what you're doing then? Protecting her?"

Of course, he was trying to protect Riley. If he told her what was going on, she would only become complicit in Alfred's crazy scheme. There were already going to be serious consequences once Senator Lipton determined that both Claire and Robert had perjured themselves. Yet a niggling voice in the back of his head wasn't convinced – and even his younger self watched him skeptically. Was that the truth or was he lying to himself?

He shook his head in irritation. "Yes, I'm doing it to protect Riley," he said finally. "That's also what we're trying to do right now, by the way. Assuming we can find this damn library."

"Hmm, well if you're sure that's why you are keeping the truth from her," the boy offered with a shrug. He didn't seem convinced. "Either way, we're almost there. I can't wait to get to the library. I really like that place."

"No, you don't," Jason snapped.

"Of course, we do," the boy insisted, looking at Jason in surprise.

Jason didn't miss his word choice. *We* do? He had no idea what

that meant, and this whole conversation was getting on his nerves. He met the boy's gaze evenly. "Really? You like getting abandoned here by our negligent parents and hanging out with a creepy old man and his spiders?" he demanded, waving his hand at the webs that still riddled the hallway.

The boy simply looked back at him sadly, his expression making Jason uncomfortable. "Is that how you remember it now?" he asked quietly.

"Should I remember it another way?" Jason countered.

"I guess not," the boy answered with another shrug, turning his attention back to the hallway.

They lapsed into silence again, Jason's thoughts spinning. This memory – if that's even what this was – was becoming progressively more surreal. Had he really enjoyed visiting the library? He couldn't remember. Just the idea of this school made him angry, the memories colored by his frustration with his parents. He spared a glance at the boy and saw the same sad expression lingering on his face, his shoulders hunched and his feet now shuffling across the tiled floor.

As Jason was about to apologize for snapping at him, the boy held up a finger, pointing down the hall. "There it is!" he declared, a small smile creeping across his face.

Jason could see that the hallway now terminated in a single door, a worn and faded sign beside it indicating that this was indeed the library. This wasn't at all how Jason remembered the entrance, but he was past comparing this strange experience to his actual memories. They had likely wandered outside the normal bounds of memory – and possibly sanity – when he had started arguing with himself.

"Finally," Jason muttered, approaching the entrance quickly and pulling the handle.

The door swung open easily, revealing a hellish landscape on the other side. The library looked like a tornado had swept through it. The bookcases were toppled against each other, and hundreds of ruined books were strewn about the floor. Beneath the destruction, he could see that the walls had been coated in silk webbing – the substance covering almost every surface and hanging in the air in thick bands.

Jason entered cautiously, worry replacing the frustration of talking to his younger self. Riley had been taken by a giant spider, and he was beginning to realize that it might not be the only creature inhabiting the school.

As he inspected the room, Jason realized that the library was larger than he remembered. It spanned nearly a hundred yards, and the ceiling towered twenty feet above them, glass windows framing

the roof. Jason saw only starless darkness on the other side of the transparent panes. Perhaps it was now night time? He vaguely seemed to recall that it had been dusk when they had entered the school.

He scanned the shadowed corners of the room as he crept further inside, on the lookout for the spider that had captured Riley. Meanwhile, his younger self stepped in after him, making no effort to conceal his movements and seemingly unconcerned that the library seemed to have been overtaken by giant spiders. Not for the first time, Jason wished he had a weapon, or maybe a flamethrower.

"She's not here," Jason whispered softly. He didn't see any sign of Riley or hear any movement within the massive room.

The boy shrugged. "We might need to look closer. The library is pretty big."

Jason supposed that his younger self might be right. The thick webbing and debris concealed much of the room. The boy had also gotten them there – albeit in a roundabout way. Jason supposed he might as well take his advice.

He stepped further into the room, avoiding the books and collapsed shelves while pushing the silk threads out of the way. He was soon standing in the center of the ruined library. Yet he still saw no sign of Riley or the spiders.

"I don't think..." he began.

He stopped as he heard a shuffling noise from the far wall, his view obscured by the thick bands of silk. For a second, he thought he had imagined it. But then it came again. It sounded like something massive was scraping across the floor, punctuated by the occasional rustle of paper. Whatever was making that noise must be big. Really big.

"I think this was a mistake," Jason murmured. "We need to leave."

As he turned back toward the exit of the library, two gigantic spiders dropped from the ceiling, blocking the exit. As their multi-lensed eyes focused on Jason, their mandibles clicked furiously. Jason could easily make out their fangs even at this distance, green venom dripping from their tips.

"Damn it," he muttered. Clearly, the beast that had captured Riley wasn't the only spider in the school. His odds of rescuing her had just dropped from terrible to hopeless.

"Shh, this is a library," his younger self admonished Jason, earning the boy an incredulous stare. They were trapped in some sort of post-apocalyptic hellhole of a library with a pair of enormous spiders, and the kid was concerned about the library's rules?

"Ahh, tasty treats enter our lair," a voice whispered from the back of the room. It echoed and reverberated strangely, as though the

creature was tasting the air with each word.

Jason turned slowly to face the other side of the library. A dark shadow loomed behind the veil of silk that hung from the ceiling, the silhouette towering nearly fifteen feet into the air. He could feel his stomach lurch. This couldn't be good.

A form shuffled out from beneath the webs, and Jason's fears proved to be correct. This spider dwarfed even the dragon they had encountered in the Sea's Edge, and he found himself staring in shock. The creature's body had grown to the size of an eighteen-wheeler, dwarfing its smaller cousins. Its spindly legs struggled to drag its bulk across the floor. A quick inspection revealed that this thing was called the Spider Queen, although he didn't glean much else.

The Spider Queen came to rest only a dozen or so yards from Jason, its face towering above him. Unarmed and without his magic, he had few options. Fighting would likely mean his death, which left just one reasonable strategy. He needed to try to reason with the beast.

"We're not your food," he ventured, trying to keep his voice even.

"You look like a treat, though," the spider replied in the same eerie voice. "So ripe and full of juices. Are you not here to feed us?"

"No. We are here for our friend," Jason replied. "A blond-haired girl. A spider took her."

"Then, you are here to take our treats?" the spider demanded, its voice growing louder. It waved a leg through the air, and Jason just barely ducked the limb in time. It stopped, pointing at a far wall, although Jason couldn't see anything through the webbing.

As he watched, more spiders descended from the ceiling and pulled back the silver strands. What Jason saw next caused him to clench his fists and his heart to race. A series of cocoons hung along the wall, moving and squirming as he watched. One of the spiders dragged back the silk of one of the bundles and a tumble of blonde hair spilled free, followed closely by Riley's confused and fear-filled face – her mouth bound by webbing. Upon seeing Jason, she struggled harder against her restraints, and her voice came out as a muffled groan.

"Riley!" Jason shouted, stepping forward.

The spiders guarding the cocoons whirled at his sudden movement, their mandibles clicking in warning.

"Ahh, is this the treat you are looking for?" the Spider Queen asked, its voice taunting.

"Yes," Jason snapped. "Release her."

"I think not," the Spider Queen answered coyly. "She is food. As are the others."

“Others?” Jason murmured, refocusing his attention on the cocoons. As the spiders pulled back the silk one by one, he could feel the bottom drop out of his stomach. The other cocoons were all filled with people he knew. Frank was there. And Angie. Claire and Robert.

“What the hell is this?” he muttered.

“Look at all the little flies that wandered into our web,” the Spider Queen cooed as it stared at its prisoners. Then it shifted its focus back to Jason and the boy. “And we can add more plump treats to our collection now.”

It ambled forward menacingly, and the other spiders began to skitter toward the pair from all around them, their mandibles clicking in a discordant rhythm. Riley strained harder against her bonds, screaming into her gag. Jason watched them approach, dread filling his mind and clouding his thoughts. He didn’t have any weapons. He couldn’t fight them, and he couldn’t run. Which left him with what?

He shook his head to try to clear his frantic, jumbled thoughts. He needed to think. This was a challenge, which meant it had to have a solution. He clung to that thought. The point of this challenge was trust. Rex had been clear about that. But how did that help him?

The spiders were close now. One swiped its leg at Jason, and he leaped to the side to avoid the blow, tumbling and rolling back to his feet in one fluid movement. This only put him in range of another of the hairy creatures, the beast lunging forward. Jason threw himself to the side to avoid being crushed by the spider’s mass, his shoulder slamming into a ruined bookcase.

“Ahh, the flies dance and spin. Only to be caught in our web again,” the Spider Queen spoke in a singsong voice that echoed harshly through the room. It seemed entertained by his feeble attempts to avoid capture.

“Tarantulas don’t catch their prey with webs,” the boy said suddenly. He still stood in the center of the room, seemingly unconcerned by the spiders that pressed in on him from every side. He had stooped over and seemed to be inspecting a book he had picked up from the floor.

Jason’s brow furrowed in confusion. He had remembered thinking something similar earlier, which was strange. That idea felt important. Tarantulas only spun silk to protect their dens, to keep out dirt and debris. But how was that inane fact important?

His thoughts were interrupted again as a hairy leg crashed into his side, sending him toppling across the room where he landed in a heap of sticky silk. He looked up and saw Riley’s cocoon resting only a few feet away. Her eyes bulged, her shouts muffled by her gag. He had to help her. He had to focus.

“Webs. Why are the webs important?” he muttered to himself.

In a flash, his younger self seemed to teleport across the room. One moment he was standing sedately in the center of the library and in the next he was directly in front of Jason, meeting his gaze firmly. "You know the answer to that. You told me in the hallway."

The boy leaned closer until his face was only inches away, whispering as though telling him a secret, "The better question is, what is this place?"

Jason's eyes widened as the pieces began to click together in his head. Rex had told him he needed to let Riley in and that this challenge was about trust. This was also clearly both a memory, and, at the same time, it wasn't – that point made abundantly clear by the giant spiders and the way this world kept shifting and changing. Hell, he was talking to a younger version of himself!

But that only left one option.

Maybe this wasn't a memory at all. But that would mean that...

He raised his gaze to look at the spiders as they crept toward him. They towered over him now, their legs reaching toward him. "You are part of my mind, aren't you? I... I'm fighting myself."

As soon as the words left his lips, the spiders stopped in their tracks, and the Spider Queen froze. Jason slowly pushed himself to his feet, feeling something shift uncomfortably in his mind. In another flash of movement, the boy was standing in front of him again.

"It took you long enough," his younger self said dryly.

"Th-they're part of me, aren't they?" Jason asked quietly. "All of this is just my mind. The hallways, the webs, this room. It's sort of like a defense mechanism, isn't it?"

The boy nodded. "Of course."

"But why the library?" Jason muttered to himself, looking around the room. He had always loathed the library. It only represented his parents' neglect.

"Did you, though? Did you always hate this room?" the boy asked calmly, apparently picking up on his surface thoughts. "Or is that just how you remember it now? Through a mental lens that has grown worn and warped with time and anger."

Jason cocked his head in surprise. "I..." He hesitated as a flash of memory crept through his mind's eye – of hours spent curled in a corner of this massive room, buried in a book.

Did I really hate this place? he asked himself.

His eyes shifted across the library, looking at it in a different light. As his gaze swept along the ruined bookshelves, they slowly mended themselves, drifting back into place. The books rose from the floor and neatly tucked themselves away on the wooden shelves. As the room pieced itself back together, the webbing and spiders began to disintegrate, dissolving into tendrils of familiar gray mist that

tumbled in streamers throughout the room.

He remembered now. He had spent hours here reading stories of grand adventures. Heroes that developed incredible powers – that dared to take what they wanted. He remembered how this room had been an escape. This school might represent his parents' betrayal, but, just for a moment, the stories trapped within these books had given him a way to forget his problems – to forget the hours spent waiting for a phone call or the honk of a car horn that never came.

Moisture was budding at the corners of Jason's eyes as he looked back at the boy. "I-I think you're right. I once loved this place, didn't I? It was my way to escape."

His younger self only nodded.

Jason heard a moan from behind him, and he turned. Riley was still bound in gray silk. The other cocoons lingered beside her, containing the limp bodies of his friends and family. He rushed to Riley's side, trying to tear at the substance with his fingers, but having difficulty finding purchase. Every time he ripped through the silk, it melded back together seamlessly.

"Why can't I set her free?" Jason demanded of the boy, growling in frustration. "The rest of the room changed, and the spiders are gone."

"Because you haven't let her in," his younger self replied. "This challenge was about trust. Yet, you have only fought her entry by creating this labyrinth in your own mind and sending the spiders to protect yourself. You need to let her in."

Jason whirled on him angrily. "You mean this wasn't enough? Seeing the way my parents abandoned me? Facing these demons that haunt my own mind? This wasn't enough?" he repeated.

The boy simply shook his head.

"I have no idea what to do then," Jason muttered.

"Yes, you do," the boy responded quietly. With a wave of his hand, a door suddenly appeared along one wall, the drywall shifting and rippling unnaturally before forming a strange gray substance. Meanwhile, bands of silver smoke drifted from the seams in the door, trailing into the room and pooling under the doorway. Above the door, a sign protruded from the wall, the word "Exit" framed in glowing red light.

"You just have to let her in."

Jason glanced one more time at Riley, who could only stare back at him in confusion – likely as taken aback by this scenario as he was. Then he walked toward the door, his mind awash in doubt and worry. He suspected he knew what was on the other side. Should he do this? Should he open this door? Riley would see what was inside. There would be no turning back. He wouldn't be able to stop the

inevitable questions that came afterward.

He paused. He would be putting Riley at risk.

Jason glanced behind him, his eyes taking in the rest of the cocoons that lingered in the room. He saw his aunt's face and Frank's. Claire and Robert. In some ways, they were already at risk, weren't they? Claire and Robert might have just committed perjury – a direct result of him not coming clean about his relationship with Alfred earlier. His aunt's home was on the line, and she was just as beholden to Cerillion Entertainment as he was, but she didn't know the truth. And some part of himself could acknowledge that he had sent Frank to finish his quest just to give himself some distance. They had only spoken a handful of times over the last week.

Then his eyes met Riley's again. He realized he had even pushed Riley away, talking himself out of his feelings for her and wallowing in self-pity. And now that she was in his life again, was he just going to keep lying to her?

His younger self stood there, watching him. The boy's expression was conflicted, an uncertain mixture of fear and pride warring for dominance as he observed Jason. "Are you certain?" his younger self asked. "Are you certain you can trust them?"

"No. I'm not," Jason murmured, his eyes on the ground.

He could feel his resolve hardening. "But I am willing to give them a chance. They deserve that. We deserve that," he whispered. Without giving himself time to wring his hands, he turned and pulled open the door in a single movement. A blinding flash of light spilled from the doorway, briefly blinding him.

As he blinked his eyes to clear his vision, Jason's gaze settled on the room on the other side. It was an octagonal enclosure, the walls standing in perfect symmetry. Meanwhile, black obelisks speared into the air at haphazard angles, pulsing with an ominous green light and reminding him of the towers he had seen in the control room at Cerillion Entertainment.

And in the center of it all was a raised platform, a single black cat sitting sedately on its surface. Its foreign feline eyes stared back at him with inhuman intelligence.

In the center of the room sat Alfred.

Chapter 47 - Muted

As soon as Jason met Alfred's eyes, the world faded away, swirling into a thick gray fog. Within only moments, he found himself sitting in front of a familiar wooden table. A milky-white globe rested upon its surface, and faint gray tendrils of energy swirled within its depths. Just seeing the strange energy again was enough to conjure the memory of the Spider Queen and the eerie school labyrinth they had just endured, sending a shudder down his back.

As Jason's eyes skimmed across the globe and toward the opposite side of the table, they met Riley's gaze. Her brow was furrowed, and her attention was fixed on him – the tilt of her head and the flash of light in her eyes speaking volumes.

She had seen inside the room.

After what felt like an eternity navigating Jason's mind and overcoming his own issues, he had given Riley a glimpse into his soul. And what had he revealed? A cat. A black cat, sitting among a minefield of dark spikes. He had no idea how she would react to that or if she would even appreciate the implications of what she had witnessed.

I bet she thinks I'm insane, he thought to himself.

Riley opened her mouth to say something but was thankfully interrupted as whispered voices drifted through the room.

Challenge 3: A Trial of Trust has been completed.

Congratulations, challengers!

While they might have finally conquered the third challenge, Jason didn't exactly feel like celebrating. If anything, this latest experience had just created a new problem – in this case, the questions that lingered behind Riley's eyes and rested at the tip of her tongue. Questions he still wasn't sure how to answer. Or if he even should answer.

Rex's wispy, black form materialized beside the table. He seemed slightly different, although it took Jason a moment to notice the change. The skeletal general was wearing what appeared to be a black party hat comprised of tendrils of dark mana.

“Congratulations!” Jason’s former general shouted, pumping his fists in the air.

When neither Jason nor Riley reacted immediately, Rex hesitated. The pair still sat sedately in their chairs and tried to avoid making eye contact. “Well, you two are just depressing,” Rex finally said with a sigh. “What happened? Why do you look like I just decapitated your dog?”

“The challenge was *interesting*,” Jason offered tentatively.

“By interesting, he means awful and strange,” Riley interjected, sparing a glare at the skeletal man. “I got captured by what I can only assume were giant mind spiders – which seem to have built a nest in Jason’s head. And then a younger version of Jason talked the real Jason into opening some weird door...”

“Okay, it was odd,” Jason said quickly, earning him a skeptical look from Riley. “You mentioned we would be viewing a memory, not that we would be going on a prolonged hike through my mind.”

Rex shrugged, waving a hand to dismiss his party hat. “The challenges have rules. I’m not supposed to reveal too much information, otherwise it undermines the lesson. Although, I have to agree that the cryptic explanations probably hurt more than they help.”

“So, what exactly did we just do?” Riley asked, shaking her head.

“What do you mean?” Rex questioned, staring at her in confusion.

“I mean, was that really Jason’s mind? It definitely wasn’t a memory – or at least it wasn’t *just* a memory.” She hesitated, cocking her head as though recalling the events inside the school. “But the spiders. The boy. Was that all Jason?”

Rex sighed and backed away from the table, pacing beside it. “Yes and no. As I said before, this crystal is special,” he explained, pointing at the globe on the table. “It doesn’t just provide a glimpse into a single memory. It hones in on something important in the Keeper’s mind, something that he has tried to bury deep. Then it creates a puzzle, allowing the participants to unlock that secret. Although, it is ultimately up to the Keeper to allow them to solve it. He has to let the Soul Guard in by deactivating his own mental defenses.”

Seeing the blank looks on their faces, the former general simply shrugged again. “Look, I didn’t build the thing, and I don’t really understand how it works. I’m just telling you what the voices tell me. If you beat the challenge, then Jason revealed something that he thinks is important.”

“You mean that cat,” Riley said flatly.

Jason interrupted her again. "Speaking of beating the challenge, you did mention a skill reward," he reminded Rex. "Well, we won. It's time to pay up."

Riley bit her tongue but gave Jason a look that made him uncomfortable. It was clear that she knew that he was trying to avoid talking about what was inside that room. She might be giving him a pass now, but he had a distinct feeling that she wasn't going to let this go. Not that he could really blame her. If he had found out Riley's deep, dark secret was that she had an uncomfortable infatuation with a black cat, he probably would have been confused too.

Unfortunately, he suspected that she was going to find the truth even more unusual.

"Uh, well, about the reward," Rex replied, suddenly looking everywhere but at Jason and Riley.

"Wait, we do get to learn a new skill, right?" Jason demanded, irritation coloring his voice. After everything they had just gone through, they better get *something*. "You said we did."

"I did say that," Rex agreed with a nod. "Although... I didn't say *who* would get the skill," he mumbled quickly.

"What was that?" Jason said, leaning forward and staring down the ghostly skeleton.

"Okay, fine," Rex muttered. "It's a skill for Riley. This challenge awards an ability to the Soul Guard that completes it."

Suddenly, Riley wasn't staring at Jason. Her attention was focused solely on Rex, and she had a hungry look in her eye, which was a relief. He planned to tell her about the room and the cat. Eventually. But now didn't seem like the right time and he needed time to process what had happened himself.

"I get a skill?" Riley asked. "Well, let's see it!"

Rex waved at the air, and Riley's eyes squinted as she read through a prompt that wasn't visible to Jason. After several long seconds, he couldn't take it anymore, the curiosity eating at him. "So, what is it?"

"Ahh, you don't like it when I just sit here in silence reviewing my newest awesome ability?" Riley asked with a raised eyebrow and a grin. "Well, welcome to a taste of your own medicine! I'd like to remind you that I sat there for an hour while you stabbed yourselves with bones in the first room."

Rex let out a cough that sounded suspiciously like a laugh. Jason immediately glared at him, the general going for his best doe-eyed look in response. The effect was somewhat lost given that he didn't really have eyeballs – just swirling vortexes of dark mana.

Although a smile still lingered on her face, Riley took pity on Jason. "Anyway, it looks like the challenge granted me a new passive

ability. It's called *Spirit Bond*. It grants me a buff to my statistics when I'm near you and a debuff when I'm too far away. I guess the idea is that it's supposed to encourage me to stay close and defend you." She bit at her lip and was about to say something else, but she hesitated.

"What is it?" Jason asked. "Worried you'll have to spend more time with me?"

Riley gave him a skeptical look. "That doesn't bother me. This is probably a useful ability, especially given the number of times I've had to bail you out of trouble," she added with a smirk.

"Hey, I seem to recall you getting kidnapped by a giant spider," Jason tried to defend himself.

"Uh huh. When I was unarmed and trapped inside your head," she reminded him. "I'd like a rematch with some real weapons." Her eyes glinted darkly at this last statement as her hand cradled the hilt of her dagger lovingly.

"Fair enough," Jason replied with a smile of his own. Some of the tension had drained from Riley, and they had resumed their usual banter, which helped settle his own nerves. Although, he had to agree with her that it felt good to have his staff back in hand and he relished the chill bite of his dark mana. He had felt powerless and vulnerable inside this last challenge, in more ways than one.

Rex just rolled his eyes at their bickering, or at least he tried to, the gesture looking a little strange with his misty form. His eye sockets seemed to rotate in place. "Not to break up your touching moment with your weapons, but I'd like to mention – again – that you two have finally completed the rest of the challenges. So, mission accomplished! Feel free to be properly relieved and excited."

As the former general finished speaking, a quest prompt appeared in front of Jason.

Quest Complete: Keeper Challenges

Congratulations! You have completed the three challenges created by the Keepers of old, and with no time to lose. Only a few days remain before Thorn will make good on his promise to return to the Twilight Throne and finish what he started. You have grown stronger, but the question remains. Are you strong enough to face the Order?

Jason surveyed the quest notification with a grim expression, his good humor vanishing. Leave it to the quest prompt and Alfred to undermine even a small victory. And Thorn was only the tip of the

iceberg. Alexion was still attacking their towns at the border, and, as far as he knew, Cecil was still in a coma from the attack on the trade school.

“Why the long face?” Riley asked. “I mean, I hate to agree with Rex, but we did just finish the challenges. We should probably celebrate.”

“Yes, but now we need to tackle the next problem,” Jason replied tiredly. “Thorn is still out there, and we only have a few more days until his deadline is up.”

“Well, if you ask me, I’m surprised you even managed to complete the challenges in a month,” Rex offered in a dry voice. “Leave it to you to see the sword as half-sheathed.”

“I’m just trying to be practical,” Jason replied. “We still have a lot of work to do.”

Riley and Rex shared a look at this statement, their expressions making it clear what they thought about Jason’s pragmatism.

Before Jason could try to defend himself, his UI dinged, indicating that he had just received a message. *What now?* he thought grumpily before tapping at the icon in his peripheral vision. A message soon filled his field of view.

Jason,

Sorry to bug you in-game, but we need to meet tonight at 5:00 PM and regroup regarding the hearing tomorrow. We’re meeting in conference room 2701C.

I’m not sure how to sugar coat this, so I won’t try. Considering today’s events, we expect that Gloria may call you as a witness tomorrow. Robert, George, and Francis will be in attendance at the meeting, and we’ll need to prep you for your testimony. You should probably be prepared for a late night.

Claire

P.S. – Don’t worry about dinner. We’ll have the cafeteria bring up some food.

“Shit,” Jason murmured after skimming the message. He

swiped the notice away with a frustrated hand. They might face challenges inside AO, but those problems didn't hold a candle to the CPSC hearing – a sense of dread settling in his stomach like a heavy weight as the full import of Claire's message hit him. He would have to testify tomorrow? He had thought he would have more time before the hearing got to this point.

"What happened?" Riley asked, concern replacing the humor in her eyes.

"Yet another problem. It looks like I need to log out for the night. I need to go prep for tomorrow's hearing. Claire thinks that they're going to call me as a witness," Jason explained.

Rex looked on with a confused expression but held his tongue.

"It's okay, Rex," Riley offered, giving the skeletal man a reassuring smile. "Maybe just give us a second. Thanks for all of your help with the challenges."

"It's no problem, m'lady," he replied with a short bow. Then Rex placed a hand on Jason's shoulder – or at least he tried to, his fingers passing harmlessly through Jason's armor. "Try not to let your problems overwhelm you, boy. There will always be challenges. You always manage to muddle through nonetheless."

"Thanks, Rex," Jason said with a weak smile. "I'm sure you're right."

With that, the former general collapsed into streamers of dark energy that funneled into the nearby globe. As soon as Rex left, Jason rubbed at his eyes tiredly, leaning his elbows on the table. Despite the unusual nature of the third challenge, it had allowed him to forget some of his real-world problems – at least for a little while. Now the weight of his situation had settled back on his shoulders once again, accompanied by the same pressing question – a question he still didn't know how to answer.

Which side was he going to pick?

"I'm sorry," Riley said softly. She stood up and came around the table to hug him, draping her arms around his shoulders. "Do you want me to come to the hearing tomorrow? I can skip a couple of classes. It might help to have at least one friendly face."

"No," Jason said just a little too quickly, and Riley looked taken aback by his response. "I-I'm sorry, I didn't mean it that way," he amended. "It's just that I'm not sure what Gloria has planned. I'm not sure I want you to see whatever is going to happen tomorrow."

"It's not like there won't be cameras in the room. Besides, you make it sound like you're on trial for murder or something," Riley replied with a confused look. "This is just a regulatory hearing, right?"

"Yeah, I guess," Jason murmured, his gaze on the crystal in front of him. If only it were a simple hearing. He just wasn't ready to

tell Riley what was really at stake, whether they had solved the weird mind challenge or not. Either way, he needed to address her concerns and put her off his trail. At least for now.

“Yes, you’re right,” he added in a louder voice, turning to glance at Riley where she hovered beside him. “It’s just a hearing. I guess I’m a little embarrassed. There will already be tons of people watching and judging. I-I just value your opinion more,” Jason said, trying to dissemble. There was some truth to his words, although he acknowledged that he was omitting his real concern – not unlike Alfred.

“I get it,” Riley said, squeezing his shoulders. She placed a gentle hand on his cheek, drawing his gaze to hers. “It will be okay,” she said and kissed him.

And, for a moment, it was.

Riley withdrew and smiled down at him. “Okay, now get out of here,” she said, smacking him on the shoulder as she stood back up. “I bet you have work to do.”

“Maybe a little,” Jason said with a small smile as he pulled up his system UI. Just before he hit the button to log off, he met her gaze again. “Thanks for everything. The challenges... being understanding. I’m not sure what I’d do without you.”

“Oh, I do. You’d crash and burn,” she replied with a grin.

“I don’t doubt it.”

And then Jason vanished in a flash of multi-colored light.

Riley was left staring at the space he had occupied only a moment before, her smile fading now that he was no longer there to witness her reaction. Her gaze shifted to the milky-white crystal in the center of the table, a mixture of confusion and concern drifting across her face.

“What is it you still aren’t telling me?” she murmured.

Chapter 48 - Devastated

The skeletal mount's loping stride evened off, and Frank settled back in the makeshift saddle, holding up a hand to the Kin around him to signal that they should stop. Up ahead, the dark walls of Fastu had just come into sight. No smoke or light illuminated the small town, and Frank couldn't detect any noise coming from the village.

While he was concerned about the state of the town, another worry also tugged at the back of Frank's mind. It had taken a few days to make the trip back to Fastu. However, during their travels, they hadn't encountered any of the native undead. That was strange. The undead were becoming more aggressive. They should have run into at least a handful of creatures. Yet there had been nothing.

Where have they gone? Frank wondered to himself. He had the distinct feeling he wasn't going to like the answer.

"Your orders, sir?" Cisco, one of the Kin, asked from beside him, interrupting his thoughts. The undead was a grizzled veteran of many battles, scars crisscrossing his pale skin. His experience made him a useful lieutenant.

"Have two small groups circle the town and set up a perimeter," Frank ordered. "We can't be sure whether Alexion and his troops are still here or not."

"And the remainder of our forces?" Cisco asked.

Frank glanced at the man. "We're going to go see what happened inside."

With that, Frank kicked at his mount and set off at a brisk pace toward the gates, knowing that Cisco would see that his orders were carried out. The remainder of the Kin followed on his heels, two small scouting parties soon peeling off as they approached the town. Nearing the wall, Frank slowed, his eyes widening in surprise.

The dark, almost crystalline material that made up the town's gate lay in half-melted clumps along the ground. The gates themselves hung open, but Frank noted that a hole had been bored into the center seam – as though a giant laser had smashed into the doors. Had that been Alexion's troops? Were they really capable of that much devastation?

Among the remains of the gate, ivory bones littered the ground. The vacant gaze of more than one horned skull stared up at Frank. Those had been the Death Knight guards. As he saw the broken skeletons, his stomach lurched. If the gate and guards had fallen, then he already knew what he would find inside.

As a unit, the group dismounted and entered through the ruined gate. The destruction they discovered on the other side painted a clear picture. The bodies of the Kin littered the ground. Alexion had simply left them where they fell, their bleached eyes staring lifelessly and empty of the dark energy that had bound their bones together.

"This was a massacre," Cisco muttered from beside Frank. "I don't see any bodies of the attackers."

Frank realized the man was right. He would normally have expected to see some white-robed men and women and Nephilim among the corpses. Yet they only found undead. Even stranger, the number of corpses didn't make sense. Frank only counted a couple dozen bodies. There had been far more people than that in Fastu.

"Scout the rest of the town for survivors – the usual deal. Report back to me if you find anything interesting," Frank barked out his orders. The Kin rushed to comply. At this stage, they had become accustomed to searching ruined villages. This had become something of a recurring problem.

"What do you think?" Cisco asked Frank.

"I don't know," he said slowly. "It doesn't feel right. There should be more bodies,"

Within moments, his scouts began to trickle back in. Each one reported the same thing. The town was empty. They had found a few more bodies near the rear side of the town, but, in total, the corpses only accounted for a fraction of Fastu's population. He couldn't help but stare at the vacant gaze of a nearby woman. Her arm had been chopped off in a ragged gash, and her pale skin had been torn open in multiple places, signaling that she had been stabbed to death.

Anger bloomed in Frank's chest, the familiar rage throbbing in his veins. After weeks spent with the Kin, he was having difficulty viewing them as merely ones and zeros on a server. They were people. And Alexion had slaughtered them. Even worse than that, there was only one explanation for the missing undead. His hands clenched into fists as he considered what Alexion had done.

"Sir," an undead woman said from behind Frank.

Startled, he whirled, an axe immediately appearing in his hand. Lightning crackled up the blade as he instinctively triggered the crystals in his gauntlets. The soldier stared at him with wide eyes, her mouth opening and closing as she struggled to form words.

Frank backed off slowly as he saw she was one of the Kin. "I'm sorry," he murmured. "You surprised me." Nearby, Cisco looked on impassively.

"I-it is no problem, sir," the woman managed to squeak out.

"What do you need to report?" he demanded, anger still boiling through his body.

“Our scouts outside of the town found tracks heading south. The group appears to be large. A hundred or more by our guess,” she offered, her eyes on the ground. A heavy silence hung over the courtyard as the undead absorbed that news.

“They took them as slaves,” Cisco finally muttered.

“Yes, they did,” Frank growled, meeting his lieutenant’s gaze. “And it seems that they are looking for more.”

“What do you want us to do now?” Cisco asked, untroubled by the fury that lingered on Frank’s face.

He shook his head, trying to clear his thoughts. The anger helped push back at his worry and doubt, but it also clouded his mind and made it difficult to think tactically. He needed to be cold right now. Like Jason. It took him a moment, but his rage lowered to a dull simmer.

The evidence indicated that Alexion had taken prisoners. The melted gate was also evidence that he was traveling with Confessors. Frank had witnessed their fiery powers by watching online videos – although he hadn’t had the opportunity to fight the white-robed zealots himself. That meant that most of their troops were traveling by foot and they were likely moving slow. He suspected that they would also have trouble traveling in the dark, which would require them to light their way.

They will be slow and conspicuous, he thought.

Frank’s gaze shifted back to the undead who loomed around him, awaiting his orders. In contrast to Alexion’s forces, the Kin could see in the dark, and they still had their skeletal mounts. They might be outnumbered – it was difficult to tell how many troops Alexion had brought with the slaves swelling their numbers. However, the undead were on their home turf, and they likely had the element of surprise.

If Alexion had chosen to move to the next town, then he probably thought he had time before Jason and his team caught up to him. Hell, for all Frank knew, the bastard might not even be aware that the villagers had managed to send a distress signal to the Twilight Throne. He probably thought he was safe to ransack the border towns.

At that thought, a wicked grin crept across his face.

Frank looked up at Cisco. “Let’s mount up. We’re going to track down these invaders and then we’re going to show them what happens when someone fucks with the Twilight Throne.”

The undead lingering around him all stirred at these instructions. He expected to see fear and concern on their faces, but only righteous anger was reflected in their eyes and the way they cradled their weapons. The Kin wanted revenge, and Frank planned to give it to them.

Chapter 49 - Wicked

Jason rubbed at his eyes, trying vainly to knead some life back into his flailing brain. Outside the car window, other vehicles and buildings rushed past in a blur. He was exhausted. The group had stayed up late prepping him for the hearing today – the one that was swiftly approaching. This “practice” had consisted primarily of Francis drilling him with dozens of questions and then reprimanding him when he went off script.

It had been a blast.

Jason could have condensed the entire process down into some simple instructions. Stick with “yes” and “no” responses. Don’t offer any additional information or try to elaborate. Also, he was supposed to remember that he was a totally normal teenager – not a sociopath. Unsurprisingly, that hadn’t made him feel more confident.

This was only made worse since he knew he had effectively spent the entire evening planning to commit perjury. Francis and George assumed that he would support the company and tell a story about an AI that stuck to the shadows – having little influence over Jason’s path through the game. However, the truth was that Alfred had wandered outside of his digital cell a long time ago, and Jason still wasn’t sure whether he should testify for or against the AI or not. Even after the meeting had ended, he had spent most of the evening tossing and turning – that single question refusing to leave him alone.

“It’s going to be okay,” Claire tried to encourage him, interrupting his morose thoughts. She was sitting across from Jason in the limo – the pair the vehicle’s only occupants today. The others had been forced to make separate travel arrangements.

“I’m not so sure about that,” Jason replied soberly. “I can’t shake the feeling that Gloria has something else up her sleeve.” He gave Claire a meaningful look as he made this last statement. He knew what she had revealed to the CPSC director about the breakin and Alfred’s involvement, but it didn’t hurt to be careful. George could have planted a listening device in the car.

Claire bit her lip, her mouth opening and closing as she considered how to frame her response. Then she pulled a small cylinder out of her pocket and tapped a button on the side. “This is a risk, but it should be safe to talk with this active. I need to level with you for a second,” she said, not quite able to meet Jason’s gaze.

“I take it this is going to be more bad news?” he asked rhetorically. At this point, he was too tired for subtlety.

"I suppose you could say that," Claire admitted. "George asked me to keep an eye on you. He seems to suspect that you might have leaked the video footage to Gloria."

An incredulous laugh escaped Jason's lips before he could help himself. "Really? That's ironic. I take it he doesn't know about your involvement?"

"Not exactly," Claire acknowledged. "I know it's ridiculous, but I have to play along for now. I-I've put myself in a tenuous position."

"Haven't we all," Jason murmured. He shook his head. "I can only guess that George must be getting paranoid. I can't see any real motive for me to go to Gloria – putting aside that I'm not sure how I would have accessed the video log in the first place."

"He thinks you might have hacked our system," Claire replied. "Which actually leads me to my next point..." She hesitated again and then finally met Jason's gaze. "I'm not sure I should tell you this. But I can't... I can't let you testify today without explaining what George did."

Oh, this is going to be good, Jason thought to himself.

"George planted that footage and made it appear as though it had been altered," Claire explained tentatively.

Jason just stared at her in shock. "Wait, what? So the video wasn't real?"

"Well, it was technically real, but George made the tape appear to be a forgery. This might take a few days for the committee's forensic specialist to figure out," Claire explained. "George's goal was apparently to draw the leak out into the open and to undermine Gloria publicly – since the log will ultimately be shown to be a fake. Although, I'm not certain if this will be enough to tank Gloria's case if she reveals the log files I gave her."

Jason's mind was wheeling as he tried to process this information. This changed his whole mental calculation. Putting aside the implication that some third party was clearly involved, he still had a decision to make. If the footage would ultimately be shown to be a fake, then it wouldn't be clear that Claire and Robert had perjured themselves. That also strengthened Jason's position if he decided to back Alfred. Gloria would probably still reveal the information about how the AI had taken control of his body during the breakin, but he couldn't avoid that result either way, and it might be less persuasive now. Senator Lipton hadn't seemed pleased with her last-minute reveal. If Jason backed Alfred now, their odds of winning had just improved dramatically – ignoring the question of whether he *should* support the AI.

"Shit," Jason murmured, shaking his head.

"I know. I didn't mean to drop this on you right before the

hearing. It wasn't safe to talk with you at Cerillion, though. George has too many eyes and ears there, and I suspect he is watching us all carefully, regardless of whether he claims that he trusts us."

"I get it," Jason replied, his gaze returning to the window. If he were George, he would do the same thing. Until this was over, the CEO wouldn't be able to trust anyone.

Silence lingered in the cabin as the pair were both lost in their own thoughts. Then Claire spoke up again. "Do you know what you are going to do?"

In some ways, it was a strange question. Almost anyone else would probably have assumed that he was going to back the company, his livelihood, and his friendship with Alfred. But Claire knew better. She had firsthand experience with the true weight of this decision. If he backed Alfred, he was putting his trust in the AI – whose motives had proven elusive. There were no save points in real life, and he was only going to get one shot at this.

Jason didn't look at Claire. He couldn't bear to see the sympathy in her gaze and a small part of him was still irritated with her. Ultimately, she was responsible for his current predicament. If she had come to him sooner, before approaching Gloria, they wouldn't be in this situation. He shook his head again. There was no point dwelling on that now. He knew he was trying to distract himself. Because he knew the real reason he couldn't quite meet her gaze.

"I-I'm not sure," he murmured.

* * *

Nearly thirty minutes later, Jason and Claire stepped into a crowded courtroom. After their brief exchange, the pair had lapsed into a heavy silence – both uncertain what to say. Although, at this point, more talking would do nothing to improve the situation.

Jason had a choice to make.

Dozens of people turned to look at Jason as he entered the room, their expressions ranging from curious to judgmental. They all knew that Jason was going to testify today. A cloud of drones swiveled to face him, dancing in the air above the gallery. They emitted an occasional faint buzz and click as they took pictures and captured video of his entrance.

He tried to straighten his back and assume a casual expression. He shouldn't look nervous. Francis had been abundantly clear about the importance of public perception in this process. He needed to look confident and carefree.

Jason made his way to his seat, walking stiffly and trying to ignore the not-so-subtle whispers of the bystanders that filled the gallery. Francis and George were already sitting at the small table in front of the bench, and they spared a curt wave as they saw Jason enter. Gloria also observed Jason's entrance, although she made no effort to greet him. Her gaze lingered, cold and clinical.

As he neared the front of the gallery, someone shouted over the crowd. "Hey, Jason!"

He turned to find Riley heading toward him, and his eyes widened in surprise. *Shit. Shit, shit, shit*, he thought to himself. *Why is she here? I don't want her to see this.*

Before Jason could react, her arms had wrapped around him, and he belatedly hugged her back. "W-what are you doing here?" he whispered in her ear.

As she withdrew, Jason could see the hesitant look on her face. "I know you told me you didn't want me to come, but I didn't want you to go through this alone," she answered quietly, side-eyeing the people that filled the room.

A part of Jason was thankful that she was here. It *did* help to see a friendly face. Although, a much larger part of him was screaming that this could only end badly. Riley had no idea what she had walked into, although the blame for that was on Jason. Maybe he should have told her what was at stake. Not that he could really do anything about that at this point.

"Well, thanks," he said, trying to muster a small smile. What else could he say?

"It will be okay," Riley said and leaned forward, brushing his lips with hers.

Jason could feel the cameras on them. She couldn't possibly be aware of the risk she was taking. If this went badly, he was sure the footage of that kiss would go viral. He had been trying to protect her by keeping her away.

"Good luck," Riley whispered and then retreated, standing near the back of the gallery.

Jason turned back to his seat, a strange, numb sensation settling across his mind. He wondered if he was starting to hit some sort of limit on the amount of stress his mind and body could handle – a breaking point where it just didn't affect him anymore. His future was only hanging in the balance here. Oh, and his new girlfriend was watching. Just fucking perfect.

At least he didn't have long to sit and dwell. Only a few seconds after taking his seat, Senator Lipton and the remainder of the regulatory committee entered the room and assumed their seats. The senator's gaze took in the crowd, and he coughed loudly to get

everyone's attention. The murmurs immediately began to quiet.

"Okay, let's get started," Senator Lipton declared, his voice carrying over the room. "Today, we will be hearing additional testimony." His gaze shifted to Gloria. "Ms. Bastion, you may call your first witness."

Gloria rose and cleared her throat. "Thank you, Mr. Lipton," she replied. Then she turned her gaze back to Jason, and he braced himself to rise. "As our first witness today, we will be calling Mr. and Mrs. Rhodes."

Jason froze, hovering above the wooden bench and suddenly unsure whether he had misheard Gloria. Had... had she just called his parents?

In the time it had taken his brain to reboot, Gloria had continued speaking. "...already authorized the pair to provide their testimony at the same time and the witnesses have waived the option to testify separately."

"Yes, yes. Everything is in order," Senator Lipton said, waving a hand.

The doors at the back of the courtroom abruptly swung open, and Jason's parents stepped through. They were dressed for court, pressed woolen suits adorning their slender frames. Their appearance was immaculate – the product of countless hours spent in similar courtrooms. As they marched down the aisle and the cloud of drones shifted to focus on them, Jason could feel a pit forming in his stomach. What was this?

As they neared Jason, his mother spared a glance at him, her expression conflicted. She might have spent years in a courtroom just like this one, but it seemed her composure had its limits. Jason could see the war of emotions that lingered just behind her eyes. It was evident in the way she unconsciously clutched at the briefcase in her hand and the slight tremor in her step. Sadness, fear, regret, and just a trace of hope.

And then they had passed him, and they were being sworn in.

Jason glanced at Francis, his gaze questioning. Surely this wasn't okay. Why were his parents here? The attorney hadn't mentioned that his parents were even on the witness list. He found that Francis was already watching him, his lips pinched into a grim line. He shook his head ever-so-slightly, indicating that Jason should maintain his composure. Which was easier said than done as his thoughts spun and danced, trying to guess where Gloria was going with this. Much too quickly, his parents had assumed their seats behind the witness stand and Gloria had risen to approach them.

"Hello, Mr. and Mrs. Rhodes, thank you for joining us today," Gloria began. "This testimony will be a bit unusual since witnesses

usually testify alone. I'd like to ask you both to only answer one at a time to ensure that we have a clean transcript of your testimony." They both nodded curtly.

"As a first step, could you please state your relationship with the young man named Jason Rhodes," Gloria said, sparing a glance over her shoulder at Jason. He saw an evil glint in the woman's eyes, and he felt a flash of anger, his fingers instinctively balling into fists.

Keep it together, he urged himself. *You can do this.*

"Jason is our son," his mother explained. Both of his parents avoided meeting his gaze.

"Ahh, could you please tell us a little bit about him? What sort of person is he?" Gloria prompted.

His dad coughed to clear his throat, looking uncomfortable. "He has always been a diligent and responsible young man. Until recently, he was a student at Richmond High, a rather exclusive private school – to which he was admitted on a merit scholarship for his academic achievements."

"What about hobbies? Has Jason always played video games?" Gloria asked.

His father nodded. "He's always had a fondness for video games. He's actually been playing various games since he was a young child." He side-eyed his wife. "We've never put much stock in the idea that games can make kids more violent or anti-social, and, to be frank, we've never seen any negative influence on his behavior or his schoolwork. J-Jason has never been a troublemaker. Actually, he has always been a somewhat shy boy – even when he was younger." His father had stumbled on his name, the first time he had used it.

"Or he used to be," his mother murmured.

"Could you please elaborate on that statement?" Gloria asked his mother, her brow furrowing in feigned confusion. Jason could see through this thin act. This exchange had clearly been staged and practiced ahead of time.

Francis rose to his feet. "Objection. What does this testimony have to do with Awaken Online or the game's AI controller? We are here to discuss the game system and its safety mechanics. Jason's character is not in question here, and we don't need to recount his life story."

Thank god, Jason thought. It had certainly taken Francis long enough to object.

"I'm also uncertain where you are going with this, Ms. Bastion," Senator Lipton said, eyeing Gloria skeptically. "Please explain how this is relevant."

Gloria seemed unperturbed by the attorney's objection, or the senator's question. Jason could feel his stomach lurch as he suddenly

realized what she was about to say, the pieces clicking together in his head with an almost palpable thud – like the tumblers on his jail cell door. It suddenly made sense. The ambush at the CPSC office. The detective leaving the room just before they arrived. The way Jason had reacted, screaming at his parents. And the look of horror and fear on their faces.

He had played right into Gloria's hands.

"As Mr. Graham testified, Awaken Online and the AI controller were built with certain safety protocols in mind," Gloria explained calmly. "Protocols that were intended to preserve the integrity of a user's memory and personality. A sudden change in the behavior of one of the game's players would indicate that those safety mechanisms are not operating properly. So, to answer your question, Jason's character and behavior are directly relevant to this hearing."

The senator seemed to chew on that explanation for a moment, his eyes darting to the drones and cameras that were trained on him. The crowd had stirred uneasily at this explanation, a low murmur buzzing through the room. Then he seemed to come to a decision. "Fine. I will allow this line of questioning. But keep it on point," he directed Gloria. "The purpose of this hearing isn't to undermine a young man's reputation. Jason is not on trial here."

"Thank you," Gloria replied with a tilt of her head as Francis retook his seat. Then the CPSC director turned her attention back to Jason's mother. "I believe you were about to explain that Jason's behavior has changed recently. Could you please elaborate?" she prompted.

His mother nodded. "Ever since this *game* came out, he's been... different."

"Different how?" Gloria asked.

"I'm not exactly sure where to start," his mother said, shaking her head in confusion. "He got in a fight at school and was expelled. Only a few days after he started playing, we had an argument over his expulsion – which he hid from us while we were out of town for work. After... after that fight, Jason moved out, and he went to live with his aunt... my husband's sister. Since then, he's barely spoken to us."

Tears lingered in his mother's eyes as she recounted these details and his father placed a comforting hand on hers. Meanwhile, Jason simply sat there. He desperately willed every muscle in his body to remain still even as anger and disbelief pumped and surged through his veins, threatening to boil over. How the fuck could they sit there and say this bullshit? They had abandoned him. They hadn't listened to him. And now they were going to help Gloria paint him as some sort of drop-out, runaway?

Francis and Claire kept looking at him in concern, their

meaningful glances not going unnoticed by Jason and their unspoken message clear. He wanted nothing more than to shout at his parents – to throw their hypocritical bullshit back in their faces. But he couldn't. That's exactly what Gloria wanted. If he acted out now, he would only prove them right.

No, the best way to defend himself was to sit there quietly and listen to his parents as they threw him under the bus and then backed over him.

"From there, it only got worse," his father continued, taking over for his mother, who was too choked up to continue. "He became some sort of dark god in this game. He's killing other players in gruesome ways and issuing bloody ultimatums. I'm sure everyone here has seen the videos."

His father hesitated. "I've even played this game myself – just to understand what it feels like. This game looks and feels real – the pain is real. The videos don't quite capture that. It feels like you're watching a TV show or movie. Yet, inside the game, the people you encounter are indistinguishable from a flesh-and-blood person."

Looking up, his father met Jason's eyes briefly before immediately glancing away with a pained expression. "Jason didn't hesitate to slit a player's throat on camera – to do much worse to others. Make no mistake, he killed those people. In all the ways that matter, that felt real to Jason – I have no doubt of that now. We understand he even became the ruler of some sort of evil city.

"That alone might have been disturbing. But then..." his father began before hesitating again, squeezing his eyes closed. "But then two teenagers broke into my sister's home. That was terrible – horrible really. And Jason defended himself. However, he did much more than that. He killed those two boys. Don't get me wrong. As parents and attorneys, we know this was self-defense. We're glad that our son is safe, and we're glad Jason was able to defend himself. Both of the boys were armed, and they had broken into his home."

His father shook his head and tears were streaming down his mother's cheeks now. "But when we spoke to the detective and he showed us the bodies... He didn't just kill them. He didn't just defend himself. He stabbed one boy fifteen times. His chest and neck were..." His father trailed off, struggling to figure out how to describe what he had seen. "It looked like those teenagers had gone through a woodchipper.

"When we were finally able to talk to Jason, h-he was angry and sullen," his father continued, clenching his mother's hand tightly. "When we expressed our concerns about this game, he yelled at us and insisted that he wouldn't give it up. I've never seen him so angry or so desperate before. Something is wrong here. Very wrong." His

father's voice cracked slightly as he finished speaking.

A heavy silence had descended over the courtroom. All eyes and ears were riveted on his parents' testimony. Jason could only sit there, struggling to stay still – to keep a bland expression painted on his face. His fingernails were cutting into his palms now, blood trickling from the wounds and staining his skin red. Yet he was numb to the pain, barely noticing it as he stared at his parents.

"I'm sorry you have had to go through this," Gloria said quietly, her voice echoing through the hushed silence. "No parent should have to sit where you are and testify regarding their own son. Could you tell us why you are here today? Why you are telling us this?"

"Because we're worried," his mother choked out, finally looking at Jason. "We love our son! That might be hard for some people to understand as we sit up here and air our fears. But we are afraid! If we can't make Jason see how this game has changed him, then the next best option is to remove the thing that has corrupted our son. And we have an obligation to alert others to the risk this game poses to their own children."

Gloria nodded along with his mother's explanation, and Jason could only watch. Despite the anger that curled through his veins, some rational part of his brain could understand his parents' perspective. However, that didn't change the fact that they were misinterpreting his behavior. They simply weren't around. They never listened to him. Of course, it would look like he had changed since this had been the first time he had ever really stood up for himself.

"Thank you, Mrs. Rhodes," Gloria said. "I just have a few final questions for you both, if that's okay."

"S-sure," his father said, shaking himself out of his stupor. His mother was no longer in any condition to reply – the purpose of the pair testifying together becoming clear. This was all an act for the cameras and the crowd – two terrified parents on camera weeping over their child.

"So, these changes in Jason's behavior started when he began playing AO?" Gloria asked.

"Yes," his father said firmly. "Before that, he was always a good kid."

"And if I'm to understand you correctly, you believe that this game somehow changed him?"

"I believe so," his father answered firmly. "I don't see any other explanation for what's happened. All of this started when he began playing this game. If you had seen those bodies..." His father shuddered and wouldn't look at Jason.

"I only have one more question," Gloria said. She gestured at Jason where he sat in the front row of the gallery. "As Mr. Graham

said during his testimony, we *are* how we *act*. Our behavior indicates who we are. Looking at this young man sitting here today – your son – the actions and choices he has made since he began playing Awaken Online, is this the same person you knew?”

After a lengthy pause, his parents finally looked at him. His mother’s face was tear-streaked, and a bleak expression creased the wrinkles around his father’s eyes, tugging his lips into a grim line. They stared back at him as though he was something foreign – alien. They didn’t look at him like parents, but as strangers. It took everything Jason had to keep his face neutral, and he could already feel moisture beginning to accumulate at the corners of his eyes.

“No,” his mother croaked. “That’s not my son.”

“Not anymore,” his father added quietly.

Chapter 50 - Resolved

Jason slammed open the bathroom door and rushed to the sink, leaning heavily against the hard, stone countertop. His stomach was heaving, and he felt like he was going to be sick. He gulped hard, forcing down the bile that lingered at the back of his throat as he splashed some water on his face – anything to distract himself from what he had just witnessed. It did nothing to blunt the image of his parents' expressions and their final words.

One of George's security personnel stepped into the room behind Jason, the man's presence going almost unnoticed by Jason as he tried to subdue his hammering heartbeat and calm his flailing mind. The guard carefully inspected each stall and then took up a position near the doorway, clearly intending to prevent anyone from entering. It seemed that George was keeping an eye on him and he had no doubt that the guard would relay any details to the CEO.

Jason looked up at his reflection in the mirror. His eyes were sunken and haunted. Beads of water dotted his face, and his skin felt cool as the faint breeze created by the building's AC drifted across his face. He tried to focus on that sensation.

"That's not my son."

His mother's words echoed in his mind as he stared at his reflection. In some ways, he couldn't help but agree. He barely recognized the person staring back at him. His body had been transformed, and he could detect chiseled muscle beneath his suit. His normally scraggly hair had been trimmed back and neatly groomed – another demand that the company had made. And those were just the physical changes. He had evolved as a person since he had first stepped into AO. Although, he wasn't sure the game could claim credit for every weathered crack in his soul. No, most of the responsibility for that lay squarely on his parents' shoulders.

"Excuse me, ma'am. This restroom is occupied," the security guard behind Jason said.

Jason glanced over his shoulder to find Gloria standing in the doorway. She arched a single eyebrow as she observed the guard. "I only need a moment of Jason's time. I'm sure he will be interested in hearing me out."

Turning back to the sink, Jason kept his attention trained on Gloria in the bathroom mirror, noting the way her eyes kept darting to his back where he stood hunched over the sink. Despite the emotions that still raged through his mind, Jason could see the advantage of

hearing out his opponent – no matter how badly he wanted to tell her to go fuck herself. He was going to have to suppress his anger again. He expected it wouldn't be the last time before this day was done.

"Let her in," Jason croaked and rose slowly.

"But, sir, Mr. Lane's instructions were clear..." the guard began.

"Let her in," Jason repeated a second time, interrupting the man. "I will explain the situation to George."

"See," Gloria said, pushing her way past the security guard. "I told you that Jason would want to speak with me."

"I'm not certain I would go that far," Jason corrected. He snatched at a towel and wiped the moisture from his face, taking his time before turning to look at Gloria.

"Hmm, I had hoped you would be more amenable to talking now," Gloria retorted. "But I still see that you are rather curt. Although, I imagine that would have something to do with the recent testimony we just witnessed."

"What do you want?" Jason asked bluntly as he turned to face the CPSC director. He had no patience for word games right now or her transparent attempts to bait him.

Gloria observed his haggard appearance with clinical precision. She seemed pleased by the despair and pain that she found in his eyes and the weary sag of his shoulders. "The same thing I wanted before," she said calmly. "I want us to work together. This game poses a danger to you and to others. I know that you understand this, perhaps even better than George and his crew of loyal fanatics."

Jason stopped the incredulous snort that threatened to bubble out of his throat. He needed to stay on the back foot here and hear Gloria out. "And what would my help look like?"

"I suspect Francis will pass on the opportunity to cross-examine your parents," Gloria said, stepping up to the sink beside Jason and inspecting her own makeup in the mirror. "While he might be able to tease out facts regarding how absent they have been, it would look terrible to grill two bawling, distraught parents. No, he will likely abstain and wait for your testimony." She side-eyed Jason. "Which is coming next."

Jason suppressed a wince and observed her as calmly as he could. He suspected she might be right. In many ways, they weren't arguing for the regulatory committee's benefit; they were pleading their case to the public. "Get to the point. What do you want from me?"

Gloria turned to face him, her expression serious and her voice hushed. "I want you to testify against Cerillion Entertainment. I want you to tell the world what really happened when those two teenagers broke into your home. Claire and Robert were too weak to tell the

truth. Their futures are tied to this game, and they have perjured themselves. But you are different. I know you understand what is at stake here – the risk that Alfred poses to the other players. I want you to do what is right and step up to protect others.”

She doesn't know that the tape is a forgery yet, he thought to himself. *Interesting.*

When Jason didn't say anything, Gloria kept going, “I had hoped to convince you before this spectacle, but you wouldn't listen to reason.” She paused briefly. “Perhaps I can offer you a solution to your current predicament instead. I know you are reliant upon George for your livelihood and are worried about what will happen to you and your aunt if the game were to be taken offline. I could talk to the detective and have your aunt's home returned. I could even offer you a job at the CPSC,” she said quietly. “A way to take care of yourself and the people you care about.”

For a moment, Jason actually considered her offer, his eyes hovering on the sink in front of him. Gloria was presenting him with a way out – a light at the end of the tunnel. He could have his life returned to him, without the pain and hardship of Alfred's influence hanging over him. He could go back to just being an ordinary kid again. Go to college. Date Riley.

Finally relax.

The offer was more tantalizing than he would have thought possible.

“Plus,” Gloria continued, inching closer, “you could recover your relationship with your parents. They just want what is best for you. You saw that out there. They love you and can't handle what Alfred has been doing to you. You could have your *family* back.”

As soon as Gloria said those words, the image of his parents' tortured faces returned – accompanied by a cold anger that surged through his veins. It wasn't his dark mana, but the effect was nearly the same. That chill rage pushed back at his fear and his hesitation, granting him strength in the face of the deal this gray-haired devil was offering him.

Fuck his parents. They had chosen their side.

But they were only partly responsible. No, Gloria had caused this. Gloria had set him up as a sociopath and convinced his parents that something was wrong with him. Gloria had introduced them to the detective. Gloria had orchestrated that show she had just put on in the courtroom. His parents were guilty of their own sins, but it was Gloria that had been pulling their strings. She was the real puppet master here. If he took her deal, he would be firmly caught in her web.

Jason was sick of this. He was tired of others pushing him

around. It may have started with Alex, but he had come to realize that both the digital and real worlds were full of bullies. Gloria was just the latest in a long string of people who had been toying with him. His parents, George, Robert, Claire, Thorn, the Old Man. It seemed that nearly everyone he knew had tried to manipulate him for their own ends. There was only one person that had been transparent with him – that had even offered him the semblance of a real choice. The eerie image of a lone black cat sitting amid a room full of obsidian spikes entered his mind's eye.

He knew what he was going to do now.

He could feel his resolve hardening, fed by the cold rage that continued to surge through his body. The CPSC director had inadvertently helped him make a decision, and the realization that he had finally chosen his path offered him a strange sense of relief. In some ways, it was freeing.

Slowly, Jason's back straightened. He clung to the cool anger, reveling in the sensation. It granted him clarity and power – even if it was only temporary. He raised his eyes to meet Gloria's, all trace of fear and despair now gone. The CPSC director flinched when she saw his expression, retreating a step.

"It will be a cold day in hell before I make a deal with you," Jason said in a grim voice. "You would have to be delusional if you think I would trust you now. Not after everything you have done to my family and to me."

Jason took a step toward the director, and fear flashed in her eyes. "You tried to paint me as a sociopath. You turned my parents against me. And you put *me* on trial here – not just this game. What would your daughter say if she saw what you had done here today? You destroyed a family and backed a teenage boy into a corner. You think you are innocent in this? Do you think your hands are clean?"

Gloria flinched at those words – her eyes large and round. The guard nearby moved to intervene, but a glare and a staying hand from Jason stopped him in his tracks. He wouldn't be interrupted right now. He wasn't going to harm Gloria, but he was done being weak. This woman had hurt him and the people he cared about.

Jason leaned forward until his face was only inches away from Gloria's. "Everyone seems to want to cast me as the villain. I've resisted that label for a long time. But you know what? Your actions today finally showed me the light. In order to protect myself, I'm going to have to get my hands dirty too. And I promise you this; I will get even for what you did here today.

"You want a fucking war? Then game on, bitch."

As he finished speaking, Jason stepped around Gloria and walked out of the restroom. The security guard spared one last glance

at the CPSC director before following him. Gloria stood there, frozen in place. Her breath trembled, and her troubled eyes closed briefly. She swallowed hard, smoothing an anxious hand down her suit jacket. She had just witnessed a real devil being born.

* * *

When Jason entered the courtroom again, a hushed silence immediately swept across the gallery. Reporters and spectators immediately stopped talking, turning to stare at him. However, this time, Jason's anger gave him strength. His back was straight, and his gait was confident. If Gloria's scheme had been to throw him off balance and paint him as unstable, then he would do everything in his power to undermine that goal. He had learned a lot in the last few months.

Sometimes, the evil path was paved in full daylight.

The only moment of hesitation came when he passed Riley, and her eyes met his. He saw pain and sympathy there, concern practically spilling off of her in waves. His stomach lurched at that sight, his newfound strength briefly deserting him and the despair creeping back in. Jason forcefully pushed those emotions away, refocusing on his anger. He gave Riley a reassuring nod, although she didn't seem convinced.

He didn't even look at his parents – who were now sitting in the gallery. He wasn't certain he could manage to maintain his composure if he did.

"Are you okay?" Claire whispered as he retook his seat beside her. Jason could also see he had captured the attention of Francis and George. The CEO had been glancing at a stream of messages trailing along his forearm, but now he met Jason's eyes, and they shared a look of understanding.

It seems the guard relayed our conversation, Jason thought with dry amusement.

"I'm fine," he said curtly to Claire. He didn't much feel like elaborating, and they didn't push him. This place was too public to talk freely.

Gloria entered the courtroom and drifted down the aisle. Jason didn't have his *Perception* skill to assist him here, but he still noticed the slight tremble in her hands. The CPSC director also deliberately avoided looking in his direction. Good. He had left an impression. It was his turn to throw her off her game.

Senator Lipton chose that moment to re-enter the room,

accompanied by the other senators on the regulatory committee. Once they had gotten comfortable, the senator eyed the room. "Okay, let's get started again. I understand that the testimony we just heard was sensitive. I want to remind everyone to keep this civil, and the members of the gallery should stay silent."

Then the senator's attention turned to Francis. "Mr. Rosencrantz, would you like the opportunity to cross-examine Mr. and Mrs. Rhodes?"

Francis rose stiffly. "No, sir. We have no further questions."

It seems that Gloria was right, Jason thought.

Senator Lipton turned to Gloria. "In that case, Ms. Bastion, you may call your next witness."

"Thank you. I would like to call Jason Rhodes to the stand," Gloria declared.

Jason rose slowly, taking his time. This was an act, and he needed to play his part. The goal here was to appear calm and rational – to make it seem as though this was just some sort of silly circus built around fearmongering. If he could get in a few hits against Gloria and his parents, then all the better. It wouldn't stop what was coming, but it might help.

Only a few minutes later, Jason had been sworn in and had assumed a seat behind the witness stand. It felt strange to be on this side of the room, all eyes and cameras focused on his face. For a fraction of a second, he felt himself growing nervous. Then he shifted his perspective. These were just enemies, and this was just another battlefield. He had stood down armies. He could do this. Besides, he had come ready for a fight.

Gloria stood and approached the witness stand slowly, not quite meeting Jason's eyes and fiddling with the notes in her hand. "Can you please state your name for the record?" she asked.

"My name is Jason Rhodes," he answered simply.

"Thank you," Gloria replied. "We have heard a lot of testimony that has indirectly touched on you and your activities within Awaken Online, including the recent testimony from your parents. I suppose we should start by addressing the primary question here. Do you think that Awaken Online has changed you or affected your judgment?"

Jason met her eyes evenly, refusing to back down. "Yes," he said. "I do."

"Really..." Gloria began and then hesitated. Even Francis and George glanced at each other at the nearby table, their expressions worried. "Wait, what did you just say?"

Jason leaned forward slightly. "I said yes, this game has changed me, and for the *better*. You all heard one version of the facts from my parents during their rather dramatic presentation. However,

they omitted a few important pieces of information. I'd like the opportunity to tell my side of the story."

He had their attention now.

He could see it in the way the reporters leaned forward and the whir and click of the drones that filled the air above the gallery. Jason was completely off script, and he didn't care. This entire debacle was just a show. The real audience was the people who watched these videos and the sound bites that were going to be digested and regurgitated on the various news channels. This was no different than the macabre warning videos he had created in-game. It was an act. And he needed to get in his punches before Gloria revealed her secret weapon.

"P-please go on," Gloria said, thrown off by his response.

"I think it's first important to point out just how much time my parents spend at home," Jason said, his voice carrying clearly across the room. "They are both attorneys, and they travel frequently for work. I would say they have spent nearly six months away from home each year for as long as I remember. I'm sure their calendars will confirm this. When I turned ten, this increased even further – since I could do my own homework, cook my own dinner, and put myself to bed – which I did, almost every night."

Jason glanced at his parents and saw the shock on their faces. "I realize I'm not supposed to pose the questions here. But how could two people that are never around really understand me? Or accurately testify to changes in my *behavior*?"

Gloria coughed into her hand to cover her surprise. "Well, what about the incident at school and your expulsion?"

Jason laughed lightly. It was becoming easier and easier to maintain the act. "You mean a private school that I never wanted to attend? I was bullied constantly – starting on my very first day. I was a poor kid among a bunch of wealthy elite. If you look at the facts surrounding my expulsion and question the witnesses carefully, you will discover that I was assaulted in the cafeteria by another student and that the school covered this up. Money can buy silence."

He spared a glance at his parents. "Oh, not to mention that this technically happened before I ever stepped foot into Awaken Online. I can understand why my parents might have forgotten this little detail since they were out of town for work at the time." His mother flinched at this comment, and his father's eyes hardened slightly.

"And let's talk about that subsequent fight with my parents, shall we?" Jason continued. "I explained what happened at school and asked to be withdrawn from Richmond. Instead, they insisted I try to beg and plead with the school to let me back in. So, yes, I moved out. I was, and am, an adult by law. And I was tired of my two absentee

parents telling me what to do while continuously failing to listen to me. Since then, I have found full-time employment with Cerillion Entertainment and have also been keeping up with my classes. I'm actually on track to graduate early. I can't help but notice that these facts were also missing from my parents' testimony."

The crowd in the gallery was murmuring now, glancing at each other in confusion. Jason was presenting as a reasonable and intelligent young man and was consistently undermining his parents' testimony. He could even see a small smile creeping across George's face, replacing his former look of concern. Jason had taken control of the narrative and was swaying his audience.

Gloria appeared to notice the same thing, her fingers tightening around her notes and crinkling the paper. Her eyes darted to the senator, and she seemed to be weighing something.

"So, you are expecting us to believe that a young man that regularly kills and massacres innocents in-game is really an upstanding and responsible – albeit misunderstood – individual?"

"I expect you to understand that this is a *game*," Jason retorted. "I feel like that has gotten lost during the last week. Surely, I don't have to explain the difference between fiction and reality to you. Or at least, I didn't think I would need to." He paused for a moment as though a thought had occurred to him. "You do know the difference, don't you?" Jason asked, feigning concern. This earned him a few chuckles from the gallery.

Gloria's eyes flashed angrily at that comment. "I believe I do. Then how do you explain your parents' concern? How do you explain their tears and pain? Surely that was *real*. Or are you claiming that they put on some sort of act just a moment ago?"

Jason wavered for a second. Gloria was clever, and that was a good question. He glanced at his parents – trying to look past their damning accusations and to understand what they must be thinking. "I... I think they believe that what they are doing is right. However, I think they have misinterpreted the situation. When they told you that they didn't know me – that I wasn't their son – I think what they really meant was that they never took the time to get to know me. They weren't around enough to learn who I really was, and they didn't listen to me and what I wanted.

"They knew me by my grades – by the fact that I didn't get into trouble. This is the sort of testimony that my parents just gave. But did they know me as a person? Did they mention my friends? My girlfriend? My hopes and fears? Was I any more *real* to them than a talking point with their colleagues?"

His mother choked back a sob at his comment, and his father clutched her hand. Jason had struck a chord, and he hoped a few

cameras had captured that moment.

He shook his head, his eyes distant. "I don't say this to hurt them. I don't want that. Perhaps my mistake was not trying to communicate better and for not standing up for myself sooner." Jason's gaze refocused on Gloria. "But this is a personal matter. This conversation should have taken place in private and shouldn't have been aired in this hearing. For that, I guess we have *you* to thank," Jason said, unable to keep the sarcasm entirely out of his voice.

"Either way, that brings me back to your first question. You asked whether this game has changed me. And the answer is yes. I've learned to stand up for myself. To take steps to improve my life and to go after the things that I want. This might just be a game, but it has shown me that I don't have to be restrained by my fears. It has made me a better person."

At this statement, a few of the spectators let out shouts of approval.

Senator Lipton smacked his palm against the bench. "Please restrain yourselves, or you will be escorted from the courtroom."

Amid the brief turmoil, Jason noticed Gloria grimace. However, she used the commotion to marshal her composure. Her eyes skimmed back to her notes, her brow pinched in thought. Jason saw the same hesitation cross her face again.

Do it, he thought. Load that last bullet and fire. I'm ready.

This was the moment that he had been anticipating for weeks.

"Let us move on to the night of the breakin," Gloria began, raising her eyes to meet his. Jason recognized that look in her gaze; he saw resolve there. This was her last shot, and she was going to make it count. "What happened when the two teens broke into your home?"

"I-I'm not certain," Jason replied, his eyes shifting to the ground. "As I told the detective, I blacked out most of the event. When I came to, I was standing over two bodies." He shuddered as he recalled the memory, no longer needing to pretend. "It was terrible..."

"I'm sorry, that must have been a traumatic experience," Gloria commented before pausing, running her fingers across her lips in thought. "Although, it does seem strange that you don't remember anything – anything at all. Don't you think that's unusual?"

Jason shrugged slightly. "I guess. I can only assume that I repressed those memories."

"Were you inspected by a psychologist after the breakin? Did you have an MRI performed?" Gloria asked. "Is there any way that you can confirm whether this sort of memory loss is normal?"

He shook his head. "No, I can't."

"Do you at least remember the time of the breakin?"

There was no sense in lying. "I believe it was between 10:14

and 10:30 PM,” he answered simply. “At least that’s what the police report says.”

“Thank you. This might seem like an odd question, but were you still wearing your headset when you came to?” Gloria asked, playing her part. She already knew the answer. It was included in the police record. He had still been wearing the device when the police arrived.

“Yes,” Jason said.

“And what type of headset was it?” Gloria asked. “One of the regular models available on the market or one of the prototypes that Mr. Graham mentioned?”

“It was a prototype. I signed an NDA and was granted access to the prototype equipment as part of my streaming contract with Cerillion Entertainment,” Jason explained. He could feel his palms getting sweaty. They were almost there.

Gloria turned to Senator Lipton. “I would like to enter Exhibit #178A into evidence. This is a log from Jason’s headset relating to the night of the breakin,” she explained, tapping at the Core on her wrist.

“Ms. Bastion, we have been through this before,” the senator retorted, waving a hand at Francis, who had immediately risen to object. “You are already on thin ice here, especially after you just dragged this boy and his family through hell. I have half a mind to just end this whole farce right now. This is a regulatory hearing, not some sort of reality TV show.”

“I assure you, this evidence is worth reviewing,” Gloria said calmly. “If you don’t believe me, then I will happily resign my position as director of the CPSC.”

This statement was met with a hushed silence, and the senator’s eyes widened. Gloria was putting everything she had on the line now. She had gone all in. The silence began to lengthen and stretch as the senator turned to his fellow committee members, the group talking in whispers. Then he finally turned back to Gloria.

Come on, turn her down, Jason thought.

“We will allow it,” Senator Lipton finally declared, Jason’s prayers going unanswered. “But if this evidence doesn’t prove to be exceptional, then we hold you to your promise, Ms. Bastion.”

“I doubt it will come to that,” the gray-haired woman answered. As she finished speaking, a screen appeared in the air beside Jason, strings of code streaming down the display before condensing into a time log. Two entries were highlighted among the data set.

“This log was taken from Mr. Rhodes’ headset and relates to the night of the breakin,” Gloria explained. “As you can see from the first mark, the log is digitally imprinted with a serial number that is unique

to Jason's headset – proving the authenticity of the log. I'm sure that Cerillion Entertainment can confirm this," she added, sparing a glance at George. His smile had vanished.

"However, it's the second entry that is critical here. Note that the log shows that Jason was logged into AO during the entire period from 10:14 to 10:30 PM. The reason that Jason doesn't remember the altercation with the two teens is that he never confronted them."

Gloria paused briefly, all eyes now trained on the screen hovering at the front of the room. "In short, I believe that the game AI director – Alfred – took control of Jason's body and killed those two teens. And this log proves it."

After that statement, the room melted into chaos. Shouted voices rang through the air and the drones buzzed and whirred. Jason could vaguely see Francis and George rising from their seats and shouting objections. He could see Claire's pale face on the bench behind them. His parents sat in mute shock as they stared at the screen – evidence that Gloria hadn't told them the full extent of what she had planned to reveal at the hearing. And at the back of the room, Riley watched Jason – a hand pressed to her mouth in shock.

Then Jason's attention shifted to Gloria. She wasn't watching the senator or the members of the gallery. She was watching Jason. And despite the uproar she had caused, he saw a trace of fear in her eyes. She *should* fear him. He didn't know what would result from this hearing, but it was clear that this was just one battle – the war wasn't over, not by a longshot. This woman had hurt him and the people he cared about. She was his enemy. Correction, she was *their* enemy.

Because Jason had chosen his side.

Chapter 51 - Furious

Jason stood in the tallest tower in the dark keep, the obsidian obelisk that represented the city's control interface hovering behind him. His gaze skimmed across the city, sweeping over the dilapidated wooden buildings and taking in the boiling black clouds that were the signature features of his home. From this distance, he couldn't make out the individual residents that trudged his city's streets, but he knew they were there.

His troubled thoughts lingered on the hearing. After Gloria's latest revelation, the senator had immediately called a recess for the remainder of the day and called Francis and Gloria into a private meeting. Jason had no doubt that the war would be waged out of the public eye now – especially after Gloria had revealed her last trump card. He had expected that George and Claire would demand a meeting to go over the day's event and debrief, but instead, they had waved him off.

Perhaps they were taking pity on him after what had transpired during the hearing.

Jason felt strange. He should be nervous. The outcome of this hearing would have very real and lasting consequences – not just for the company, but for Jason and his friends. Yet, in some ways, he felt like a weight had been lifted from his shoulders. Or, perhaps more accurately, like someone had lit a fire under his ass. He felt like he needed to do *something*.

The anger he had felt in the real world was only magnified in-game, with his dark mana surging through his veins in a frigid river. His eyes were entirely black as he took in the city below him. The epiphany he had experienced during his encounter with Gloria had also followed him into Awaken Online. He was done being weak. He was done letting others dictate the terms of battle and manipulate him. It was clear to him now that he had just been running away from his problems and coming up with excuses for his indecision.

In short, he had been afraid.

He didn't want to lose his city, or his friends, or his livelihood. It was easy not to give a shit when you had nothing on the line, but Jason had a lot to lose now. And that thought terrified him. He could admit that now, even knowing that the fear was unproductive. It just kept him from acting; it kept him second-guessing himself.

No. Anger was better. The rage fueled him, and it lowered his inhibitions. It drove him forward and made it easier to focus. He clung

to that emotion, wallowing in it and feeding it. Giving it the images of his parents. The destruction of his crafting school. Every hardship he had endured. He fed it until the cold ember in his chest blossomed into a frozen boulder, the chill energy steeling his resolve.

He glanced at the quest prompt in his peripheral vision, watching the counter tick down. They only had two days left until Thorn would strike, but Jason didn't plan to wait. He was done letting Thorn push him around.

"Pint, come to me. Now," Jason ordered, his voice echoing through the small room.

A small gray form flashed into existence beside Jason. "What, Meanie..." Pint began but stopped. He eyed Jason's form nervously, dark tendrils of mana peeling away from his body and lashing at the air – hungry and searching.

Jason turned slowly to look at the imp, absently noting the fear in his eyes. "Call a meeting of the Shadow Council. I want them downstairs in fifteen minutes."

Pint still stared, his mouth hanging open slightly. "Do not make me repeat myself. Go," Jason ordered. The imp nodded hastily and then vanished, as though relieved to be able to flee the room. The anger quieted any sense of guilt Jason might have felt.

As soon as Pint left, he turned his dark gaze back to the city below him. This was his fucking home, and it was real to him. These were his people, his Kin. He might not be able to strike back at Gloria – at least, not yet. But there was something he could do in the meantime. He could find Thorn.

And when he did, he was going to kill him.

* * *

Only a few minutes later, Jason arrived in the conference room. He stepped inside, having opted to walk instead of calling for Pint. The time had allowed him to calm down slightly and his dark mana no longer peeled away from his body. Yet the icy rage still lingered in his chest, just waiting to be unleashed.

His council looked up as he entered. Everyone was there, apart from Frank and Vera. The group looked haggard and beaten after what they had all endured over the last few weeks in-game, their eyes dark and hollow and their clothing weathered and wrinkled. Their gaze hovered on Jason's form and the way inky tattoos of energy traced his pale skin, seeming to pick up on his dark mood. A somber air filled the room, and no one leaped to their feet in greeting or joked

this time around.

He and Riley shared a look as Jason took his seat at the head of the table. He could see the unspoken question in her eyes, concern and confusion warring for dominance. They hadn't had an opportunity to speak after the hearing since the reporters and spectators had rushed Jason as soon as the regulatory committee had called for a recess. It had been all George's security could do to insulate him from the crowd as they made their way to a car outside.

I'll have to explain eventually, he thought to himself. But this wasn't the right time.

Jason's gaze shifted across the table, the others silently waiting for him to begin. His attention locked on Cecil. Worn bandages still covered large swathes of skin and Jason idly wondered if the burns would cause permanent scarring. He hadn't had an opportunity to see how the game's NPCs recovered from severe wounds, although the occasional scars on his soldiers indicated that even magical healing had its limits.

"I'm glad to see that you're still with us," Jason said to Cecil. "How are you feeling?"

"Like shit," the small engineer grunted. He ran a hand through his beard, glancing aside. "Although, I suppose I wouldn't be feeling anything if you hadn't saved me from the flames."

Jason noticed Eliza nudge the surly little man and give him a meaningful look. He let out a short sigh. "In fact, I-I've been meaning to thank you," he muttered grudgingly. It took a visible effort for him to spit out those words.

Jason's lips curled in amusement. "I would have done the same for anyone here," he said firmly. "Thanks are not necessary."

Then he turned his attention to the remainder of the group. "I wanted to call you all here today to discuss our next steps. We have two days until Thorn's deadline is up and we need to make a few preparations."

"H-how are we supposed to prepare when we don't know how he will attack?" Eliza ventured tentatively, not quite meeting Jason's gaze.

"By planning for the worst," he answered shortly. "From this point forward, we are done hiding and reacting. We are going to take the fight to Thorn."

"Those are pretty words," Morgan groused. "But how exactly do you propose to do that? Even Jerry hasn't had any luck finding this group – assuming they are even staying inside the city."

Jason turned his full attention to Morgan and took in her haggard appearance for the first time. She looked almost as bad as Cecil, minus the bandages. Her skin was pale and clammy, and heavy

circles hung under her eyes. He also noticed that she wasn't carrying a book today, which was unusual for the mage.

"Leave that to me. I have a few ideas for how we can find Thorn. But first, how are the crippled undead we sent to your school?"

Morgan waved a dismissive hand. "The situation was salvageable."

"Will they be able to fight? We will likely need every available pair of hands we can get," Jason said.

The dark mage hesitated for a moment, rubbing at her eyes tiredly. "They will be able to *help*," she said finally, not quite looking at Jason.

Her behavior seemed off, but he immediately chalked it up to their situation. Between pouring over her tomes in search of any reference to the gates Thorn had mentioned, assisting with the injured undead, the increased security at her school, and her regular duties, he was sure this must have been taxing.

"So, what's your plan?" Riley asked hesitantly, breaking the silence that had descended over the room. She was still looking at him like he might burn the place down.

Jason rose from his seat and began pacing beside the conference table as he spoke. The movement made him feel more at ease, the burning chill in his veins making it difficult to sit still. "The first matter we need to address is equipping our troops and protecting the civilians."

His gaze fixed on Eliza. "Our potion business is booming, and we have already made back more than our initial investment. The travelers are beginning to put up competing products, but it isn't nearly enough to undermine our sales, and we've been buying those up to maintain our monopoly. I'd like for Eliza to purchase equipment for our troops; she already has delegate access to my trading account. Buy up anything useful you can find and reserve a stockpile of healing and mana potions for our own use."

"But I'm not sure what..." Eliza began.

"Jerry can help answer any questions you have regarding the equipment we'll need," Jason interjected. The innkeeper gave Eliza a reassuring nod, which did little to ease the worried frown plastered on her face.

"The next step is our civilians." Jason glanced at Riley. "I'll need you to round up everyone and move them into the keep. Anyone who is willing to fight, tell them to report to Eliza and Jerry for equipment and then join the leaders of each division. Once that's done, I have a few other ideas for how to fortify the city."

"The Kin won't like that," Riley replied, biting her lip in thought. "Morale is already low, and this looks like we're retreating."

Jason shrugged. "I can't fix that problem. They will be safe inside the keep if things get hairy over the next few days. Plus, this will help with our true goal."

"Which is?" Riley asked, raising an eyebrow.

"We're going to hunt Thorn," Jason answered with a grim smile.

This declaration was met with incredulous silence, the members of the Council merely staring at him as though he had grown a second head. He could understand their skepticism. He would have felt the same way until today. But he was done retreating and hiding. Taking the offensive was risky, but the power and anger that continued to surge through his body made him numb to the consequences.

"That's a nice sentiment," Morgan commented dryly, finally saying what everyone else was thinking. "But what makes you think that you can accomplish it?"

"You'll see soon enough," Jason replied confidently, before shifting his gaze back to Riley. "We will only allow undead into the keep," he continued. "We will check them one by one, and this will help weed out the Kin from the travelers and Thorn's men. If it helps with morale, explain that our goal is to find and eliminate the Order." This earned him a considering expression from Riley as she weighed his instructions.

"That will only address part of the problem," Jerry commented, his eyes fixed on the table. Jason noted his sullen expression. No amusement danced in the innkeeper's eyes and no jokes sprang from his lips. This was out of character for the gregarious thief. "Even after searching for the last few weeks, I was unable to find them," he added in a defeated voice.

And I'm sure he blames himself for our losses and the injured, Jason thought.

Jason had paced around the table by this point, and he rested a hand on Jerry's shoulder. "You did your best. You were hunting for a needle in a haystack. There was nothing to stop Thorn from shifting positions multiple times per day, and this was always a longshot. The deaths and injuries are not on your hands." Jerry nodded slowly, but he still didn't meet Jason's eyes.

"And how is the situation any better now?" Cecil asked in an incredulous tone.

Jason glanced at the engineer. "Because I have an idea, one that actually involves you. When Riley visited Vaerwald, she came across crystals that could sense different types of mana. Do you know what I'm talking about?"

"Aye," Cecil answered. "We keep a stockpile of the gems at the crafting school – or what's left of it. They are useful for constructing

and troubleshooting prototypes.”

“How many do you have now?” Jason asked.

“I’m not sure... I’d have to go check to see how much damage was caused to our storerooms. I haven’t been back to the school since the fire...” Cecil trailed off, rubbing at his bandaged arm as he spoke. He didn’t seem to relish the idea of re-entering the school – not that Jason could blame him.

“Go find out. And take a few troops with you,” Jason said. “Gather any of the crystals you manage to find and then meet me by the training grounds.”

“What’s at the training grounds?” Morgan asked in confusion, tilting her head slightly.

Jason’s smile widened further. “While we’ve been busy, Frank sent us a present. It seems we have a rather impressive stockpile of bones now and I instructed our troops to leave them in the pens near the training yard.”

“Okay,” Morgan offered with a shrug. “And my orders?”

“Continue with your research,” Jason instructed. “We need to know more about these gates. It would also help if you could round up your students and assign them to the available divisions garrisoned here. I suspect they’ll need magical support in the coming days.”

“Most are simply novices,” she retorted with a huff.

“Which are better than nothing,” Jason responded immediately, staring Morgan down. He could understand her hesitation and sour mood, but he was in charge here, and they were long past the point of coddling apprentices. This was about survival now.

Morgan finally glanced away, seemingly acknowledging his instructions. Then the room lapsed into silence as Jason observed the group. They were all now deep in thought, staring off into space as they each considered the tasks that he had given them. Yet their spirits seemed more resolved than they had when he’d entered the room. It seemed his own angry undercurrent was now driving them all forward. They had the beginning of a plan, and he saw a small flame of hope in their eyes – accompanied by something darker. A desire for revenge.

He could work with that.

“Alright, let’s get started,” Jason said, smacking the table with his palm. “We have a lot of work to do and not much time to do it. It’s time we take the fight to Thorn.”

Chapter 52 - Tiny

After convening the meeting, Jason had Pint teleport him outside. Within only moments, he was standing in the market and eyeing the vacant stalls. His first goal was to head for the training grounds. He had some work to do before Cecil showed up. It would help if the engineer could find the mana crystals, but he wasn't banking on it.

Before he could move away from the keep, the air beside him ripped open in a flash of multi-colored light. Riley appeared only a few feet away. Jason hesitated as he saw her staring at him. He had been hoping to put off this conversation longer – not interested in rehashing what had happened at the hearing. He also suspected that Riley was interested in more than just his feelings. Between the surreal experience in the third challenge and the evidence that Gloria had revealed, he could only imagine that she was beginning to piece together the puzzle.

"You're kind of staring," Riley observed dryly, her mouth curled in a grin.

"What can I say, you're gorgeous," he replied as he matched her smile.

"Well, thanks, I guess. Under other circumstances, I'd be flattered, but I can't help but think you're just trying to deflect."

Jason rubbed at his neck. Damn it. Riley was far too perceptive and intelligent to let this go, but he couldn't afford to be distracted right now. He needed her help, though. He would just have to tread lightly.

"Maybe a little," he admitted, deciding there was no point in denying it. "I guess you want to talk about the hearing, huh?"

"Yes," she said, crossing her arms and waiting for him to begin. Her expression made it clear that he had just asked a really stupid question.

Jason let out a sigh. "Fine. But we should walk and talk at the same time. There's a lot we need to get done and not a lot of time to do it," he said, gesturing toward the eastern side of the market. "We can move in *Sneak*. I don't want to draw any attention to what we're doing."

This earned him a curt nod from Riley, and the pair immediately blended into the shadows. They flitted from doorway to doorway, staying out of sight and keeping low. Their movements were automatic now, and they rarely bothered to give each other hand

signals or directions. Their time spent in the challenges had allowed them to now work together seamlessly. Honestly, it felt good to be back in their element.

“So, I’m not really sure where to start,” Riley said in a hushed voice as they moved, side-eyeing Jason. He saw concern in her expression. “Are you okay?”

Jason looked away, pretending to inspect the street ahead. The cold sensation in his chest quavered at the look in Riley’s eye. He couldn’t handle her sympathy right now, and he couldn’t afford to break down. “I-I’m about as good as I can be under the circumstances,” he replied. “You know, for a guy who just had his parents publicly disown him,” he added with a bitter chuckle.

Riley nodded in understanding and the pair lapsed into silence as they moved under the awning of a nearby building. Jason could see that Riley was struggling to frame what she wanted to ask next. Then he heard her sigh. “Okay, I don’t know how to say this tactfully, so screw it. What the hell happened at the hearing? I just don’t get why your parents would have said those things.”

“I do,” Jason grunted in reply, pausing beside a doorway. “Gloria used our first meeting as a setup. If she spoke to the detective, then she would have known that my parents basically abandoned me while I was in jail. So, she had them confront me after telling them horror stories about the game. And I played right into her hands. I got angry. I bet that just solidified what she had been saying about the game *changing* me.”

He closed his eyes for a moment, but it did nothing to blot out the memory of his parents’ faces during the hearing – the look in their eyes. “I suspect that they thought they were doing the right thing,” he added quietly. “I guess the jury – or the committee – is still out on whether they did or not.”

Riley touched Jason’s arm gently, and he looked at her, seeing the compassion lingering in her eyes as she watched him. “I’m sorry, Jason.”

“Honestly, I’m not sure I want to think about this right now,” he murmured apologetically and looked away. “Dwelling on it won’t fix anything, assuming there’s anything left to fix at this point. My relationship with my parents was already strained. I’m not sure it’s going to recover from this.”

It was the truth, but he couldn’t help but wince at the way he had shifted the focus of the conversation to his parents. If he could convince Riley that they were poking at an open emotional wound, maybe she would give him some space. His real goal was to avoid the rest of the questions he could see lingering in her eyes – the ones he wasn’t certain how to answer. Like had Alfred really taken over his

body? Was he somehow being manipulated by the AI?

"I... I get that," Riley replied slowly before tentatively placing her hand in his. "I know this is rough and not normal at all, but if you need anyone to talk to..."

"I know," he said, with a small smile. He squeezed her hand affectionately. "Thank you."

With that, they continued their easterly march, darting down the street and avoiding the occasional pedestrian. The silence stretched on for several minutes and Jason was beginning to think that he might have dodged the real set of questions that he knew Riley wanted to ask.

Yet his hopes were soon dashed.

"There was one other thing that's been bugging me about the hearing," Riley said softly.

"Just one?" Jason quipped. "I'm surprised you were able to narrow it down."

This earned him a smile from Riley before she shook her head. "Do... do you think there is any truth to what Gloria was saying. About Alfred taking over your body and killing those teenagers?"

It took what little control Jason had left to maintain his composure, and he stumbled slightly moving to an open alleyway, his palm smacking against the boards of a nearby building to catch himself. He paused as he considered his response. He was toeing a fine line here. He didn't want to lie to Riley. But was telling her the truth the right thing to do? Did he really want to make her complicit in this conspiracy? Gloria had shown she was willing to go to nearly any length to attack Cerillion Entertainment. Would he just be painting a target on Riley's forehead?

Why the hell does everything have to be so complicated? he thought mournfully.

In some ways, he could sympathize with Alfred. How the hell could a person ever figure out what the "right" thing to do was when the goal posts kept shifting? Was lying to someone you cared about okay if you were protecting them? He doubted Riley would see it that way, but that didn't make the decision any easier.

"Maybe," Jason finally murmured. Then he glanced at Riley. "I mean, I guess it's possible that Alfred took over my body. I don't remember much."

He dropped his head as though looking at the ground again, but he kept his eyes on Riley – silently thanking the Old Man for his magical cloak. She looked concerned, and he saw her brow furrow in confusion, but there was enough truth in his response that he had appeased at least some of his own guilt. That hadn't technically been a lie. Technically.

"I just can't shake this feeling that something else is going on here," Riley murmured. "Aren't you nervous?" she asked. "If Gloria is right, the AI could be manipulating us without us knowing it. It might even be replacing or altering memories – and Robert and Claire could be complicit in that!"

Jason grimaced. She was right. Alfred could be doing those things, and he knew for certain that Robert and Claire were complicit, but he still had trouble believing that the AI would go that far. Although, he also hadn't expected the AI to manipulate Robert and Claire like he had. People were willing to go to crazy lengths when they were desperate – as Gloria and his parents had just clearly demonstrated. What would Alfred be willing to do to survive?

A part of him still trusted the AI – whether that was real or a product of Alfred's influence, he couldn't be certain. Alfred was the only person in this story that had given him a choice. It had been a shitty one. But it had been *his* to make.

"And then there is the third trial," Riley continued when he didn't respond, her eyes staring off into space. "At the end, I swear I saw a cat sitting inside that last room. It looked a lot like that cat that sometimes follows you around – Onyx, I mean." She shook her head in confusion. "And Rex said that challenge was intended to force you to reveal some part of yourself."

Her eyes focused on Jason. "I guess I never asked about this before. I'm not sure why. Where did you find Onyx? Is he some sort of in-game pet?"

Jason forced himself to shrug casually. "Onyx just showed up one day and started following me around." Also, technically true. "As for the trial, I'm not sure what that room was intended to reveal. But if Alfred has gone AWOL, then wouldn't he be controlling what happens in the game? Why would he tip us off that he was manipulating us?"

It was a reasonable question. Why the hell had Alfred chosen to show Riley that memory and that strange room? He may as well have painted a sign on Jason's back that screamed "suspicious." Jason intended to find out the next time he talked to Alfred – right after he wrung his irritating, furry neck.

"I guess you're right," Riley finally replied, pausing beside a stack of crates and turning to look at Jason. "Sorry. I know you said you didn't want to dwell on this. I'm just worried about you, and I have to say that today is the first time I've ever second-guessed logging in."

Jason nodded, his eyes skimming across the familiar training grounds that had appeared up ahead. His escape was in sight.

"It's okay," he said, turning back to Riley and wrapping his

arms around her. "I'm just glad I have you," he said quietly, kissing her softly. That gesture hurt him more than he had expected, and he could practically feel a crack forming in the cold, angry stone in his chest. His mind recoiled in pain as his anger faded, and he summoned his dark mana with renewed effort.

And I'm sorry I can't tell you the truth, he silently added in his head.

She withdrew, holding his gaze. "Well, again, if there is anything that I can do..."

"What I need right now is to forget," Jason interjected. "I need to deal with a problem that I can actually control." He hesitated, his fingers balling into fists as the memory of his encounter with Gloria resurfaced again. "And maybe I need to blow off a little steam."

A grin curled Riley's lips, her eyes filling with dark mana. "Well, I can help with that. How about we find Thorn and then perhaps we can both find a more *constructive* way to deal with our stress?" She said this last part while clutching at one of the daggers at her waist.

Damn, she is awesome, was the only thought running through Jason's head – which did little to help with the kernel of guilt he felt at misleading her.

"That sounds like a plan," he said with a grin of his own. However, as Riley turned to look at the nearby training grounds, he could feel his smile falter and crack – his mask slipping. He hoped he was doing the right thing by keeping these secrets from her.

* * *

Having dodged another bullet with Riley, the pair parted ways. Riley dashed off toward the nearby barracks to gather troops. She would need to hurry if she was going to move the Kin to the keep before Thorn's deadline expired. Soldiers knocking on doors would help usher the complaining undead out of their homes and would speed that process along. Jason suspected it would still be a frustrating undertaking. He didn't envy her that job at all, but he'd picked her because he knew she could handle it.

I guess that went okay, he thought to himself as he watched her retreating form. At least he had bought himself a couple of days before Riley would start pressing again. Maybe, by then, he could think of an explanation for the cat that made sense – although he didn't feel too confident. Alfred hadn't made this easy for him.

For now, he needed to focus. Jason's gaze shifted to the stables

adjacent to the training grounds. The hulking structure loomed in the distance, and the occasional flash of lightning illuminated the stablehands entering and exiting the building. The structure was now used to house their skeletal wolf mounts.

Jason moved slowly around the structure to the pens on the other side, making certain to maintain *Sneak* and stay out of sight. He had little desire to draw attention to himself right now.

As the pens came into sight, Jason froze in shock. Frank had explained that he had sent the bones from one of the nests he had found outside of the Twilight Throne. However, Jason hadn't quite appreciated just how many bones they had been talking about.

A massive pile of ivory filled the pen and loomed above the decaying wooden fence that ringed the enclosure. The fence did little to contain the monstrous number of materials. Bones were piled more than a dozen feet into the air and were spilling between the railings. Jason couldn't make out the bodies of any of the minotaurs or wolves William's group had delivered a few weeks ago, and he could only assume that their last batch was buried somewhere under the massive pile of bone.

"Well, this should work," he murmured to himself.

Jason's hands launched through the gestures of *Custom Skeleton*, and the world began to slow to a crawl around him. Within only a moment, a familiar translucent blue creation panel appeared in the air, and the pile in the nearby pen was illuminated in a nearly blinding sapphire light.

He had a vague sense of what he planned to build, and he was mentally kicking himself for not thinking of this sooner. The Shadow Council had been right. Scouring every inch of the city on foot was impossible. They just didn't have enough manpower, and there were too many buildings and people. But what if they had something else that could scout the city for them more quickly? Combined with moving his people to the keep, this would make it much more difficult for Thorn and his compatriots to hide.

To be fair, Jason probably wouldn't have been able to pull this off after his first encounter with Thorn. He could have ordered the Kin to retreat to the keep several weeks ago, but then he was pretty sure he would have done Thorn's job for him. If distance made the heart grow fonder, then proximity made the heart grow more homicidal. In the tight quarters of the keep, the Kin would probably have killed each other long before Thorn ever showed up.

Jason now knew much more about the Order after his conversation with Logan in the aftermath of the second trial. Specifically, he knew that they were forced to purge the mana in their bodies, and they had all undergone hellish training. These were

guerrilla fighters – anti-mages that would go to any lengths to stop him and the Dark One. But that also meant there was one obvious way to detect Thorn and his men.

The first step was building something that could act as his scouts.

Jason's thoughts kept returning to the Hippie's temple. He had solved the irritating god's maze by creating a batch of hand-sized Drones that he had pre-programmed to map the shifting, square rooms. He hoped that he could replicate something similar here, but he wasn't just searching a perfectly square grid this time. This creature would need to be able to enter buildings and scour debris – as well as explore difficult-to-reach locations that weren't accessible by foot. With the Order's training and physical prowess, no potential hidey-hole was off limits.

As a first step, Jason pulled up his design for the Drones and bones sprang from the nearby pile, piecing themselves together in midair. The creature's body was a lump of bone with a single dark dot of mana affixed to its surface – the sphere acting as a lone, black eye. Spindly finger bones radiated out from the body, forming spider-like legs. This design was an okay start, but the creature was simply too slow. He remembered its ungainly, awkward walk. This might have been sufficient in the Hippie's temple, but they didn't have the luxury of time.

Jason pulled up a nearby human hand by tapping at the inventory menu on the control panel. A skeletal set of digits immediately ripped themselves from the pile and formed two skeletal hands beside the drone. Jason removed the thumb and two fingers from each hand and fused the remaining two sets of appendages to the drone's back with dark mana. Then he adopted the same design he had used with the Vile Wings, forming a ball of dark mana, and pressing the energy flat – binding the edges of the small sheet to the finger bones.

The effect was to create a set of flap-like wings on the Drone's back. With a thought and a wave of his hand, the Drone slowly came to life. Its new limbs jerked experimentally before Jason ordered it to fly. It beat its wings with increasing intensity, managing to hover just an inch above the ground before dropping back to the dusty earth.

"Damn it," Jason muttered. Two wings weren't enough. His guess was that the Drone's body and legs were too heavy. That wasn't good. He expected he was going to need to add more weight before he was done.

A mental command sent the Drone back into the air in front of him, where it rotated slowly as he inspected his new design. He couldn't remove the legs. The Drone needed to be able to enter tight

spaces and buildings – so flight wasn’t always an option. However, he could possibly reduce the weight of the torso and add more lift.

Jason yanked the ivory ball out of position and opened a hole in the bottom, carving out the bone and hollowing the Drone out. Then he repurposed the remaining skeletal fingers he had left floating beside his new creation, creating another pair of wings and affixing them to the Drone’s back. This effectively created a tiered set of dark wings.

A few minutes later, he finished with his revisions, surveying the new result.

The Drone might have looked like a spider before, but now it more closely resembled a locust with its multiple sets of wings. With a wave of his hand, he activated the Drone, and it dropped to the ground.

Here was the moment of truth.

The creature’s four wings began to flap in an awkward, discordant pattern and Jason could feel frustration bubbling in his chest. A moment later, however, the pattern normalized as the Drone found its rhythm. Its miniature body lifted from the ground, hovering in the air in front of Jason, awaiting orders. A smile crept across Jason’s face as he surveyed his new creation.

“You’ll do nicely,” he murmured. “Except, how much mana do you cost?” he asked his new Drone, suddenly recalling the change to his summoning spells. Jason tapped at the creation panel, naming his updated design Drone 2.0 and completing the creation process.

The world abruptly lurched back into motion, a pounding headache already ricocheting through Jason’s skull. He cradled his aching head with one hand as he pulled up his Character Status. He needed to check the creature’s mana reserve cost now that Alfred had updated his summoning skills.

Character Status

Gender:

Male

Alignment:

Neutral

Mana:

14651

H-Regen:

14651

M-Regen:

14651

S-Regen:

14651

Strength:

14651

Endurance:

14651

Affinities

Fire:

Water:

Earth:

“Hmm, you only cost 50 mana,” Jason said to himself, glancing between his character screen and the new Drone as his mind raced through a set of mental calculations. He could only assume that the default 100 mana reserve cost had been reduced since the new Drone was small and lacked offensive capabilities. Right now, the creature couldn’t do anything more than annoy and distract Jason’s opponents.

His math soon revealed that he could summon the new Drones up to his current Control Limit of 111 and this would reserve 5,550 mana, leaving him with 8,075. So, he was going to lose a little less than half his health to pull this off. That seemed like a reasonable tradeoff.

“What the hell is that thing?” a voice spoke up from behind Jason.

He immediately whirled, his staff materializing in his hand and a *Soul Slash* arcing away from the leading edge. The blade stopped just an inch shy of Cecil’s neck, the small engineer standing there in wide-eyed shock.

“Um... never mind. New question,” Cecil said slowly, recovering from his shock and his gaze shifting to the blade of dark mana at his neck. “What is this beauty? A new ability?”

“A product of lots of training,” Jason replied, withdrawing his weapon and releasing the *Soul Slash*. “Perhaps you shouldn’t sneak up on a person,” he added grimly. He felt stupid for not keeping better track of his surroundings. He had been too focused on his new creation. If that had been Thorn, he would almost certainly be reliving his death right now.

“I’ll make a mental note for next time,” Cecil replied dryly, waving a hand behind him. Soldiers materialized out of the shadows of the nearby stables. The Kin dropped from *Sneak* and automatically established a defensive perimeter around the pen.

A pair of soldiers walked up to Jason and Cecil, lugging a heavy sack. They promptly dumped its contents on the ground, crystals and gems rolling free from the cloth sack in a rainbow of colors. Jason eyed the pile greedily, his thoughts racing as he considered the ways he could use the elemental crystals.

“Anyway, I brought you some presents,” Cecil declared, observing Jason’s reaction with some amusement. “This is what we could salvage from the crafting school’s storage rooms, although Eliza can likely purchase more from the auction house. The colorless crystals are the mana detection gems you wanted. Of course, you already know what the colored gems can do.”

“This is perfect,” Jason murmured. Without another word, Jason immediately snatched up one of the colorless gems and his hands wound through *Custom Skeleton* once again.

“What...” Cecil began, his mouth moving as though in slow motion as he attempted to pose a question, even as his eyes widened ever-so-slowly.

A few alterations later, Jason released the spell. He stumbled slightly and cradled his head as the painful feedback struck him for a second time. Despite the dull ache throbbing through his skull, his eyes were riveted on his new Drone, surveying the results of his changes.

“...the hell are you doing?” Cecil finished asking. Then his confused gaze focused on the Drone and he realized that Jason had already completed his spell. “I hate when you do that,” he muttered.

At a command from Jason, the new creature flitted closer to him. As it came within a few yards, its body began to glow with a malevolent, dark light.

“Ahh, I see,” Cecil murmured, approaching the Drone and inspecting it from several angles. “You hollowed out its torso and placed the detection gem inside.” He glanced at Jason. “My guess is that you drilled holes in the torso to let the light through?”

“Exactly,” Jason said, his eyes still fixed on his new Drone.

“Interesting. I see what you’re trying to do,” Cecil murmured, his hand running through his beard as he considered the small creature. “How many of these can you make?”

“Over a hundred,” Jason said.

This earned him another shocked look from Cecil. “A hundred...” he muttered. “Shit. This might just work after all.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence,” Jason replied with dry amusement.

Then his attention turned back to the Drone. He still had more work to do. He needed to build this creature’s brothers and design the search algorithm. That second step would be complicated, but Jason had continued to study Robert’s lessons in his occasional free time. He was optimistic that he could pull it off.

It turned out that it took *hours* for Jason to complete the remainder of the drones and design the search algorithm. The programming for the new Drones was much more difficult than he

could have imagined. When they were in direct line of sight, he could send specific mental commands. However, he needed his minions to be able to systematically search the city and the interior of each building even when he wasn't nearby – which meant they needed to be able to dynamically navigate uneven and irregular buildings. Jason could begin to sympathize with what Robert had said during his testimony. Programming these instructions line by line was incredibly challenging.

The first few tries had the test Drone barreling into the side of a building, smashing its body apart and filling the air with a fine white powder – much to Cecil's amusement. Another attempt had the Drone trying to burrow into the ground. While Jason suspected that Thorn *might* have tunneled underground, it didn't seem too likely.

Despite numerous failed trials, he slowly managed to iron out the bugs in his search algorithm and the Drones improved until they could autonomously search a building. Or, at least, they managed to scour two or three buildings nearby without breaking anything or accidentally destroying themselves. That would have to be sufficient since Jason didn't have time to conduct more extensive tests.

"Okay, this is going to have to be good enough," Jason murmured, surveying the field beside the stable. His Drones littered the ground like a swarm of eerie, pale bugs.

"Finally," Cecil muttered, hopping off the nearby fence and coming to join Jason. "Let's get this thing underway then!"

Jason was more than happy to accommodate Cecil's request. Saying a silent prayer to the Dark One, he started the search algorithm.

As one, more than a hundred Drones flickered to life, their bodies twitching and jerking as their wings began to beat at the air. They lifted from the ground slowly, spiraling into the air like a pale tornado. Their wings created a faint buzzing sound that caused the air to vibrate and set Jason's teeth on edge. Meanwhile, the nearby Kin looked on with awe-struck expressions as they watched the undead locusts fill the sky.

Jason glanced at the map that floated in his peripheral vision, watching as the green dots that represented his Drones filtered through the nearby streets. His lips warped into a cruel, hungry smile as he watched his swarm, reveling in the sense of accomplishment while his dark mana pulsed through his veins in excitement.

Cecil eyed him with concern and took a cautious step back, muttering under his breath. Jason spared no attention to the engineer. His thoughts were only on the future. If this worked, there would be nowhere for Thorn to hide.

The hunt had just begun.

Chapter 53 - Scorching

“All three divisions are in position, and we are ready to commence the operation,” an undead scout reported, his skeletal limbs standing at rigid attention. “We have completely encircled the target.”

“Good. Return to your division and await my signal,” Jason ordered. The soldier nodded curtly and stepped out of the room, immediately dropping into *Sneak* as he made his way out of the building.

Jason’s attention turned back to the nearby window, surveying the street below him. He was standing on the third floor of a ruined structure in the southern portion of the Twilight Throne. This building provided a good vantage point of the nearby intersection, an old warehouse sitting catty corner to his position. The warehouse’s windows were dark and boarded up, and he didn’t detect any movement.

“Are we certain they’re inside?” Riley asked quietly from beside Jason as she inspected the building. Her eyes glowed darkly, punctuated only by a thin circle of crimson where her pupils might have been.

Jason spared a glance at the display that hovered beside him. Dozens of green dots riddled the area, representing the new Drones that lingered on the nearby rooftops and inside the buildings around them. Two dots in particular flashed an ominous red, the creatures having infiltrated the warehouse across the street.

Over the last in-game day, his tiny creatures had scoured nearly every inch of the city. He almost couldn’t believe his luck when a couple of the creatures had flashed red – indicating that they had possibly identified the Order’s location.

This could be a mistake, of course. They could be surrounding an empty building or about to capture a pair of corpses. If they were wrong, then this might also alert Thorn and his accomplices to their new detection system – they probably wouldn’t get a second try at this. Then there was the possibility that this might be a trap. These doubts had been circling and rebounding through his skull for hours now.

However, the bottom line was that they needed to take the risk.

“There’s only one way to find out,” Jason finally answered, his expression grim. He forcefully renewed the dark mana that drifted through his body. The chill energy soon swept away any doubt or

hesitation that lingered in his mind. He was done second-guessing himself.

Jason turned his attention to the others filling the room. He briefly met Jerry's eyes and then his gaze lingered on Grunt's hulking form before shifting his focus to the division leaders who stood nearby. They anxiously awaited his orders, bloodlust spilling off of them in waves. He also noticed the way the group checked and re-checked their equipment and how they eyed him skeptically – as though measuring Jason against an invisible opponent. They wanted revenge just as badly as he did, but they were also worried. This was an opponent that had taken out Jason and Frank without even trying.

He needed to offer them some reassurance.

“Okay, let's go over this one more time,” Jason declared, tapping at his map and projecting it into the air. A model of the nearby intersection and warehouse soon hovered in front of him. “At my signal, our fire mages will strike the building from across the street – as well as the buildings on either side. We are going to burn the building down and then flush the Order out of hiding and into the street. Ice mages are located behind our perimeter to make sure the flames don't spread too far.”

Jason rotated the map slightly to show the clusters of green dots around the building. “Our forces have entirely encircled the warehouse; four full divisions are stationed in the nearby buildings. There is nowhere for them to retreat.”

He met the gaze of his division leaders. “Remember, the goal here is to push them out into the open and attack from a distance. Do not engage in close quarters or cramped spaces. We cannot afford to underestimate our opponents. They will be strong and incredibly fast, and they will have the ability to neutralize our spells. But they aren't invincible, and that's critical. They are human, and there is a limit to what a person can dodge.

“So, as soon as your soldiers have line of sight, blow them away.”

“What about the nearby structures and civilians?” one of the Kin asked.

Jason shook his head. He glanced at Riley and received a nod in return. “All civilians have already been evacuated from the area, and damage to the nearby structures is acceptable. Our priority is neutralizing the Order. Nothing else matters.”

He hesitated, meeting the gaze of each person in the room, his eyes filled with unholy energy and bands of mana crawling up his arms and neck. “Let me be perfectly clear. This mission is not about capturing these men. We kill on sight. These assholes killed and injured our people – innocent civilians. It is time to make them pay.

“Any last questions?” Jason asked. This was met with silence, the room filled with an almost palpable sense of anxious excitement.

Suddenly, clapping echoed through the room, and every eye turned to find Jerry slow-clapping in the corner. “What?” he asked as they all stared at him. “That was a fantastic presentation. I got goosebumps – just look at my arm!” In a flash of movement, the innkeeper was across the room, stabbing his forearm in Riley’s face.

“I don’t see anything,” Riley replied in a dry voice.

“Ahh, that’s because I lied,” Jerry said, twirling his mustache as he leaned forward toward the archer. “I don’t get goosebumps. I’ve got nerves of steel – hell, I once stole an entire bookshelf out of the Great Library in Vaerwald by myself.”

“I’m pretty sure that’s supposed to be nerves of *steel*,” Jason replied, resisting the urge to sigh. “Like the metal.”

“Huh, well that doesn’t make any sense at all,” Jerry murmured, suddenly looking confused and turning his back to the other soldiers as he paced the room muttering to himself. Jason could still see Jerry’s expression, his pale face assuming a more somber expression. Catching his eye, the innkeeper gave him a small wink.

Jerry’s antics had garnered a few small smiles from the men and women filling the room, lightening the mood slightly. There was a method to the former thief’s madness that was sometimes difficult to detect. However, Jerry understood the importance of morale – that much was clear. Jason could already see the tension draining from their men.

“Anyway...” Jason continued with an eye roll, playing his part as the flustered commander. “If there’s nothing else, then go take your positions. We attack on my signal.” The remainder of the group nodded and filed out of the room, leaving only Jason, Riley, Jerry, and Grunt – the giant’s silent form looming in the background.

“It’s a shame that we can’t capture them,” Riley murmured, her eyes riveted on the warehouse across the street. “We could learn a lot.”

In another flash of movement, Jerry was standing beside her once again. “You’re right. And dead men don’t tell any tales – well, except for me, I guess,” he added with a thoughtful look on his face.

In a flash, the capricious thief’s expression sobered, his eyes suddenly going hard and lifeless. “However, these men are too dangerous to take half measures. We have to go into this prepared to kill. There is no room for hesitation here.”

Jason had to suppress the shiver that ran up his back at Jerry’s tone and expression. Jason was starting to suspect that his carefree demeanor might merely be an act. The only question was which Jerry was the real one – the jokester and clown, or the notorious thief. Riley

had told him about Jerry's former position back in Vaerwald. Jason suspected there was a reason that the thief wasn't dead or rotting behind bars by now. To stay alive and free, he either had to be meticulous and cunning or possess an extraordinary amount of luck.

The innkeeper's expression lightened, and he shrugged. "Either way, I'm calling dibs."

"Dibs?" Riley asked with an incredulous expression.

"Certainly, my lady. The tradition of dibs is well documented."

"Suuure..." she replied slowly. "But what does that mean here?"

"Why, that I get the privilege – nay, the honor – of killing these men myself."

Jason just shook his head. "We'll see what we can do," he said in a dry tone. "But either way, Jerry's right. The priority here is to eliminate the Order. Everything else is secondary." Riley didn't push back on that point, but her forehead was still creased in thought. She looked worried – not that Jason could blame her. They would only get one shot at this.

A notification flashed in his peripheral vision, and a glance at Jason's map confirmed that his division leaders had rejoined their units. They might fail here, but they couldn't let that stop them. Now was the time for action.

"Okay," Jason murmured. "It's showtime."

* * *

The fires started small at first, a simple splash of orange amid the oppressive darkness that hung over the street. Then more fiery blooms erupted along the warehouse's roof. It took only a faint breeze for the flames to take hold of the ancient, dry wood, and burn with vigor, spreading across the structure's roof at an incredible pace.

Similar bolts of flames struck the buildings ringing the warehouse, the missiles erupting from the shadows. Within moments, the fire had spread, reaching inside the buildings and burning the hollowed husks from the inside out. Plumes of dark, billowing smoke filled the air as the fires consumed the structures in an ever-growing inferno.

Jason's hand clenched reflexively around his staff, his knuckles white as he watched the blaze from across the street – his eyes fixed on the door to the warehouse. He could only hope that the Order agents took the bait. Squeezed in from all sides by the roaring flames, Jason wanted to push them into the intersection.

He spared an anxious glance at his map, noticing that the two blinking Drones had changed position – likely following whoever was inside the building.

“The target is on the move,” Jason said softly, earning him curt nods from Riley and Jerry.

The archer had taken up a position at a nearby window, an arrow already nocked and ready to fly as soon as the first opponent stumbled into sight. Meanwhile, the innkeeper had assumed a more relaxed posture, leaning against another windowsill and humming softly to himself while cleaning his nails with a dagger – as though untroubled by the raging flames.

A shadow stumbled out of the warehouse, barely visible through the smoke and crumbling debris. Jason would have missed the movement if not for his enhanced *Perception* – the skill highlighting the blurry shape in blue.

“We have contact...” he began, interrupted by the twang of Riley’s bow.

Before Jason could finish his sentence, Riley’s dark missile was already spearing toward the target, joined by a hail of arrows from the buildings surrounding the intersection as the Kin identified the blurry shape. The missiles created a humming noise that warred with the crackle and pop of the raging bonfires nearby.

The dark figure barely avoided the arrows, rolling forward. Smoke billowed out around his form, creating a clear pocket of air that finally made him fully visible. Jason immediately recognized the familiar bandages of the Order. Although, this was only one of Thorn’s foot soldiers.

As soon as the man was completely visible, a rain of projectiles filled the air with renewed intensity. Even the lower-level mages and archers were now able to get a clear shot. Just before the hail of missiles struck, a second form darted from the building. The figure’s movements blurred as it raced forward. Jason stared in disbelief as he saw the missiles knocked aside as though they had struck a protective wall of force.

A moment later, the second man stood over his brother in arms, his staff still spinning, but now moving slowly enough to be visible. *Great, they’re using weapons now.*

“Another foot soldier,” Jerry observed. “It doesn’t look like Thorn decided to join our little soiree.”

“At least not yet,” Jason murmured.

He didn’t need to issue a command – his troops already knew what to do now that they had pushed the Order agents into the open. Several things happened at once. Great walls of flame erupted along each street, creating multi-layered barriers nearly 10 feet thick and 15

feet tall – effectively boxing in the two men. They might be able to drain mana, but there had to be a limit to how fast they could accomplish this feat. At least, that had been Jason's thought. The walls of flame were intended to slow them down, not stop them entirely.

Another blast of missiles raced toward the two men. They dodged, danced, and weaved through the hail of projectiles. One of the agents was rapidly spinning his staff until it was merely a fast-moving blur. The agents held out against a wave of missiles so dense that it nearly obscured them from sight as the Kin launched everything they had at them.

As the cloud of projectiles began to clear slightly, Jason held his breath, his eyes searching for the two agents. What he found put a smile on his face. An arrow had pierced one man's thigh, and the other was nursing an arm where a malignant black substance clung to his skin. They might be fast and strong, but everyone had their limits. Jason had learned that the hard way.

It only took a 50 on 1 fight to level the playing field, he thought grimly.

Before he could celebrate, however, the two men moved, running toward one of the walls of flame. As Jason looked on, the unarmed man unwrapped his hands, plunging his flesh into the fires while the other with the staff covered his rear. Within seconds, the flames began to dwindle as the agent swiftly drained the mana that sustained the spells. Meanwhile, his accomplice continued to ward off the constant hail of missiles that pelted their position. It would only be a matter of time before they broke free.

Jason began to move toward the window. He needed to get down there. If he could put pressure on them, he might be able to force them to stop draining the wall, and his ranged troops could keep whittling them down.

Before he could jump down to the street below, a hand landed on Jason's shoulder, the grip vicelike. "Now, now," Jerry said. "Where do you think you're going? You don't plan to share with the group?"

Despite his carefree choice of words, when Jason looked back at the innkeeper, he saw only rage and death in his eyes. These were the men that the thief had been chasing for weeks – the deaths and injuries of countless civilians piling up in the meantime. Jason could understand that look. Jerry wanted revenge.

"I called dibs," Jerry said softly.

"We also shouldn't reveal your presence or your new abilities. Not if we can help it," Riley grunted, her bow still humming as she launched arrow after arrow. "We don't know if Thorn is out there somewhere and these two might still get away."

Jason grimaced. She was right – even if he wanted nothing

more than to plunge his *Soul Slash* into the two agents. He was also concerned about Jerry, though. He and Riley might respawn, but the rogue only had one shot at this. However, Jason also noticed that Grunt made no move to stop Jerry or leave his position near the doorway. If the hulking giant had faith in his employer, then so should Jason.

“Go on then,” Jason grunted. “And make sure you end this.”

“You don’t need to worry about that,” Jerry murmured. With a wild look in his eyes that Jason had never seen before, the thief bit his thumb hard, congealed blood pushing slowly through the wound.

And then, he was gone.

He didn’t just slip into *Sneak* or leap through the window. One moment, Jerry was standing in front of Jason and the next... nothing. There was no sound in the room nor any telltale shadow indicating that he had stealthed.

Before Jason could question what was happening, a cry of pain erupted from the street. He glanced down, his eyes widening in surprise.

Jerry had plunged his blade into the staff-wielder’s lower back. The man had been distracted, spinning his weapon to ward off the hail of missiles that were still streaming toward him. Meanwhile, his ally’s attention had been focused solely on the wall of flame, slowly breaking down the magical barrier. With a vicious twist, Jerry ripped the blade free, blood spurting from the wound. It appeared he had used a specialized blade, tearing out a jagged chunk of flesh. The Order agent dropped to a knee, rolling forward and swiping backward with his staff in a single fluid movement.

However, the weapon met empty air. The thief was already gone.

The agent rolled to a stop, missiles pelting the cobblestones behind him. He began spinning his staff again as another barrage hurtled toward his position, but his movements were slower now, and he favored his side. Even at this distance and with the chaos in the street, Jason could see that his blood was swiftly staining his bandages. Jason was surprised he was able to move at all since the position of the wound indicated that Jerry had stabbed into his right kidney.

The other man draining the flames quickly backed off, realizing that his companion was wounded and could no longer cover him. The occasional arrow and bolt of dark energy now made its way past the whirling staff. The unarmed agent retreated to his injured accomplice, limping slightly due to the shaft still embedded in his thigh, before grabbing the staff and assuming a defensive stance. Meanwhile, the man Jerry had attacked crawled back to the flames – clearly intending

to continue draining the wall of fire.

Jason noticed the way the staff-wielder's eyes darted around the intersection – trying to identify their attacker and his next angle of approach.

Without warning, the Order agent twisted and swept forward with his staff. The weapon stopped in midair, and, as Jerry flashed into existence, Jason could see that the staff rested against one of the thief's daggers. A manic smile was painted on Jerry's face as he watched the Order agent and the thief's skin seemed to glow with an ominous red light. Then his other hand flashed forward, and several dark missiles erupted from Jerry's palm. The Order agent leaped back, neatly batting the throwing knives out of the air. Between the smoke, the missiles still raining down upon the area, and their blazing speed, their movements became difficult to follow. Jason could only pick out faint flashes as they struck at each other.

Out of curiosity and unable to contribute directly to the battle raging in the street, Jason's hands wound through his *Custom Skeleton*. The world soon slowed to a crawl. This gave him a chance to see the real battle raging in the street, and his mouth dropped open in surprise.

Jerry was fighting on an entirely different level. Even with the time-slowng effect of Jason's spell, the thief was still moving. More than that, however, he seemed to be stuttering, popping into and out of existence at seemingly random moments. One second, the agent's hand was stabbing toward Jerry's face, and, in the next, Jerry was standing two feet away and unleashing another barrage of throwing knives. The thief's erratic jumps and movements threw the agent off balance, and the injured man stumbled as he turned to intercept the missiles, his leg finally acting up.

Jerry immediately capitalized on the opening – not to attack the uninjured agent, but to simply vanish. The thief reappeared beside the injured man who was now kneeling on the ground, his hand buried in the nearby wall of flame and his blood leaking onto the ground from the hole in his back. Jerry neatly sidestepped a palm strike from the injured agent. The other agent threw his staff like a spear toward Jerry, trying to buy his ally a moment to recover. Except the projectile was intercepted by a well-timed arrow from Riley – knocking it off course and the weapon clattering to the ground. Jerry hadn't even bothered to look at the other agent, as though he had known Riley would intercept the staff. Instead, he looked down at the injured human, his grin widening.

“Checkmate,” Jerry mouthed the words, even though Jason couldn't hear him at this distance. The agent met his gaze, hate and rage filling his eyes.

Jerry's daggers flashed forward simultaneously, tearing through the agent's neck with surprising strength. He ripped the man's head from his shoulders, sending it tumbling through the air as his neck fountained blood, the crimson droplets spraying in every direction.

Jerry never stopped moving. Even as the thief killed the first agent, he was already dashing through the spray of blood which hung suspended in the air. To Jason's enhanced senses, Jerry seemed to casually push aside the crimson droplets. The thief barreled toward the other agent, and the man met his charge. The two raced toward each other at a blazing pace, batting aside the occasional stray arrow with an almost casual swipe of a hand or dagger.

They met in a rapid-fire series of blows that was incredible to watch. The agent was now unarmed, but that didn't seem to make any difference. He dodged, ducked, and spun as though his body was boneless – showing a level of agility that Jason was certain he didn't possess. Jerry's onslaught was relentless, and he didn't give the man room to launch a counter attack, his blades stabbing at him again and again.

As the seconds stretched on, Jason noticed that Jerry's movements were slowing and the agent was beginning to get in an occasional punch or kick. Jerry's chest was moving rapidly, his breathing shallow and fast and Jason could just barely detect a grimace on his lips. The red glow along his skin had also begun to lessen. The thief lunged forward one last time, his blade sweeping at the air. The agent immediately came up inside his guard, a look of triumph painted on his face as his palm struck Jerry squarely in the chest.

Fire blossomed from the agent's fist, sending Jerry hurtling backward and slamming his slender form into a nearby building – causing the boards to crack and crumble from the force of the impact. Jerry lay unmoving on the ground, and the agent stood a couple dozen feet away, a smirk beginning to curl his lips. A glance at Jason's raid menu confirmed that Jerry's health was redlining, but he was still alive. He wouldn't be for long, however. Jason grabbed at the windowsill, releasing his spell as he prepared to drop down into the intersection.

Hesitating, Jason realized that the Order agent wasn't moving or capitalizing on his advantage. He merely stood in place, his expression frozen in mockery.

The man suddenly dropped to the ground with a dull thump, several belated arrows embedding themselves in his corpse.

"Too fucking slow," Riley murmured from nearby.

And then Jason saw it.

A single dark shaft protruded from the agent's neck – the shaft

highlighted in an ominous blue glow as his *Perception* skill triggered. Riley had used that final exchange to get in one last shot. And she had made it count.

Jason looked down at the carnage.

Fires raged across the nearby buildings, the flames stretching dozens of feet into the air. He could already detect a telltale blue glow in the distance – evidence that their ice mages were summoning a blizzard to quiet the flames and keep them contained.

Scraps and fragments of dried wood and ash littered the intersection, mixing with the blood of the decapitated Order agent and his companion. Several Kin had already entered the road and hovered over Jerry's prone body. Jason let out a sigh of relief as he saw the thief's health stabilize in his peripheral vision.

The battle was over – at least for now. Only two bodies lay on the ground; they were missing a third. Thorn was still out there somewhere, and the clock was still ticking.

Chapter 54 - Torturous

After the battle, Jason immediately began shouting orders, directing their troops to put out the remaining fires and start cleaning up the destruction they had caused. The surrounding buildings were little more than ash and ruined debris by the time they were done, and the remains still smoldered despite the faint covering of ice that had crept across the area. He also made sure to set up a defensive perimeter. Despite the deaths of the two agents, they couldn't be certain whether Thorn was nearby or might use this opportunity to launch a counterstrike.

Meanwhile, Riley turned her attention to Jerry. She approached slowly. Grunt already stood protectively over the innkeeper, snorting at any of the Kin who moved too close. Jerry was still alive, that much was clear from the raid menu. However, Riley still had unanswered questions. She could see Jerry's movements in her mind's eye, his body little more than a blur as he had fought two members of the Order. She had no idea how he had pulled off that level of power.

As she neared Grunt, he crossed his burly arms and practically growled at her, his glowing green eyes warning her to stay back.

"I just want to make sure he's okay," Riley said, rummaging through her pack and pulling out another glowing-red health potion. "He could probably use this right now."

Grunt reluctantly stepped aside, living up to his name as he snorted at her. However, he remained close, watching her every movement with unblinking eyes.

Riley knelt beside Jerry, unstopping the potion, and placing the rim to his lips. As she administered the potion, she noted the way his armor was charred. Yet, as she gingerly peeled back the material, she could see that the skin of his chest was largely undamaged.

What hurt him? Maybe there was internal damage? she wondered.

That was the only way she could explain a single blow taking out the thief. It still didn't feel right. She hadn't forgotten that it was Jerry who had first taught her *Blood Mist* or that he had been involved with Lily – who had been one of the last Furies and the former owner of her bow. Could Jerry have other abilities that he hadn't disclosed? Could he be using the same sort of blood magic as the Furies? From what Lily's spirit had told her, the class was gender-locked.

Jerry also hadn't given her any sense that he could use the same spells – relying on more mundane movements and combat skills. Riley knew his combat abilities were extraordinary, but today's battle

put him in an entirely different league altogether. She was beginning to think that she had underestimated him.

She sighed. Not that she had time to dwell on this mystery, and Jerry wasn't exactly in any condition to answer her questions. Besides, they still had plenty of work to do before they reached Thorn's deadline – assuming he didn't try to move up the timetable on whatever he was planning now that his accomplices were dead.

"Some help over here," Riley called out to the nearby Kin. Several soldiers immediately rushed over to help her.

"Please take Jerry to the..." she began and was cut off as Grunt simply knocked the soldiers aside, literally tossing them out of the way and sending them sprawling across the cobblestones. Their complaints froze in their throats when they saw who had knocked them back, self-preservation outweighing their irritation. The giant then turned and lifted Jerry's body gently and cradled him in his arms, glaring at Riley and the soldiers as though challenging them.

"Uh, or never mind..." Riley murmured as Grunt marched off with Jerry, heading in the direction of the tavern. The relationship there was yet another puzzle.

Having taken care of Jerry, Riley looked around, suddenly realizing for the first time that Jason had vanished amid the chaos – along with the bodies of the Order agents. Riley's brow furrowed in confusion and she pulled up her map, searching for the green dot that indicated Jason's presence. She soon discovered his icon in the dark keep.

Why would he have taken the bodies back to the keep? He hadn't mentioned anything before he left. Jason had been acting strangely ever since the third trial and the dream-like memory they had experienced together – not to mention the eerie black cat. Riley could still visualize the way those feline eyes had stared at her, filled with an unnatural intelligence.

Things had just gotten worse after the hearing and the confrontation with his parents. It could just be stress. If they were to trade places, she doubted that she would be acting normally after everything that he had endured lately.

Still, she couldn't shake the feeling that something was off. Jason had just been so... cold since the hearing, and he had been channeling his dark mana almost constantly. He was even more ruthless and single-minded than usual. She was worried about what that meant for the city – not to mention their newfound relationship. At some point, she needed to talk to him. Really talk. Not just let him make up excuses to get out of the conversation.

She shook her head. There would be time to address their real-life problems once they had dealt with Thorn. For now, she could

answer one of her immediate questions. She was going to find out why Jason had taken the bodies to the keep and what he was up to.

* * *

Riley stepped off the final stair and into a circular stone room, the space illuminated by flickering blue torchlight. She was standing in one of the keep's towers – a section of the massive structure she had never explored before. Two soldiers stood in the doorway, their pale eyes darting toward her as their hands lingered on their weapons. They hesitated once they recognized her hooded form, nodding ever-so-slightly and allowing her to step into the room.

Her *Perception* skill triggered as she passed the soldiers, highlighting their hands in faint blue light. Their fingers were still wrapped around the hilts of their weapons, and their pale skin was stained with blood, crimson droplets dripping from their fingers.

What the hell? Why do they look so on edge? she wondered.

Riley didn't have to wait long to find out. She froze as she took in the scene inside the room. The circular enclosure had been divided into several cells that ran the length of the walls, heavy dark crystal forming the bars. Inside two of these cages, Jason had placed the Order agents, or what was left of them. As she looked on, Jason tossed one agent's dismembered head into the cell with his corpse, which hit the stone floor with a wet thud before rolling over to the body, leaving a red trail in its wake. Their crimson lifeblood still leaked onto the floor, mixing with the gray dust that coated the stone.

The bodies of the two men had been practically torn apart – the damage clearly not caused by the recent battle. It looked like someone had deliberately carved into the flesh of their hands and feet, rectangular chunks of skin and muscle torn from their limbs. She looked back and forth between the two corpses and the nearby guards. Then the answer struck her.

He ordered them to remove the crystals, she thought numbly. *But why?*

Her attention quickly shifted to Jason. He hadn't seemed to notice her presence, his gaze fixed on the corpses. She saw no sympathy or compassion on his face now – only a cold, hard rage that filled his eyes with unholy power and caused tattoos of energy to crawl across his pale skin. She started to say something, but one of the guards placed a hesitant hand on her shoulder, shaking his head slowly. Apparently, Jason's behavior had even scared the Kin. Maybe she should wait to see what Jason was up to.

A hollow feeling settled in her stomach as she watched Jason's hands begin to dart through an intricate pattern, harsh guttural words spilling from his lips. She recognized this spell, and suddenly what Jason was doing clicked into place.

Oh my god...

Thunder cracked outside the tower, and a glance at a nearby window confirmed that the billowing, dark clouds above the city were swirling and colliding. A bolt of dark-mana-infused lightning suddenly arced into the room through the window. The light momentarily blinded her, and the sudden heat and force threw her back against the wall.

Riley blinked rapidly to clear her vision as she struggled to regain her balance. Once her eyesight finally cleared, she saw what had become of the Order agents. Their bodies had transformed, flesh sloughing off one man's body until only his ivory bones remained. The other man's head reattached itself with a sickening squelching sound, his skin turning a pale, sickly green-white.

The pair shifted and twitched inside their cells, and Jason remained quiet, studying them. The two men slowly sat up, looking around themselves with bleached eyes and soulless dark voids of energy. When they finally glanced at each other, their eyes widened in shock before their gaze shifted to their own bodies – their hands running down ivory bone and decaying flesh experimentally.

The look of horror on their faces would stick with Riley for years. Wordless screams of torment filled their eyes, a realization that not only had they died, but Jason had taken more from them than their lives. Almost in unison, they looked at Jason's dark form, his face partially obscured by his hood and his mouth pressed into a grim line.

"W-what have you done?" one of them managed to mutter, his voice coming out harsh and poorly formed – as though he was attempting to speak for the first time.

"Nothing that you don't deserve," Jason answered coldly. "You died in that last battle. I have brought you back as the undead. You are now very much the thing that you hate. A being sustained by dark mana."

"Why would you do this?" the other agent asked, his jaw clacking slightly. He struggled to maintain his composure, forcibly turning his attention away from his body and revulsion flashing across his face. These two men might be accustomed to physical torment, but what Jason had just done to them went far beyond any torture they might have endured before.

"For two reasons," Jason replied, slowly approaching the cells. "The first reason is that I need to know what Thorn is planning."

“We will never tell you,” the man spat in return.

“We will see about that,” Jason replied, unperturbed by the man’s reaction.

With a shrug, he continued, “But what’s the second reason, you might ask?” Jason leaned forward, dark tendrils of energy snapping at the air around him. “The answer is simple. Revenge. You two will be spending quite some time in this tower. And I am going to make certain that you savor every single moment of your new existence.

“You are now the thing you hate, your souls corrupted by one of the gods you are so intent upon destroying. I’m not going to kill you, and I’m not going to harm you. I don’t have to. For the remainder of your existence, you will live with the knowledge that you have failed. That your souls are damned.”

Jason’s mana flared powerfully, creating an aura of darkness around him that made it difficult to make out his body. “You will serve as an example to others. When you mess with the Kin – with my people – I will take your gods-damned soul.”

The two agents unconsciously shifted away from Jason, backing up against the tower wall and their eyes widened in horror. Riley could see even their considerable mental fortitude cracking. Jason wouldn’t let them go. He wouldn’t kill them. There would be no end to their imprisonment. In some ways, he was doing the same thing to them that the former Keeper had done to Logan – trapping them inside the keep for eternity.

Riley coughed slightly, and Jason whirled, his hand already reaching for his staff. He paused as he saw that it was Riley standing behind him. She could see the effort on his face as he tried to rein in the power that flowed through his veins. Ever-so-slowly, his mana began to recede until only the tattoos of energy crawled across his skin.

“What are you doing?” Riley asked, stepping into the room.

“Nothing that these two don’t deserve,” Jason answered, his glare shifting back to the two agents.

Riley felt conflicted. These men might have hurt their people, but did that really justify what Jason was doing? In some ways it was even worse than what Thorn had done. They might have killed the Kin, but had they tortured them?

Yet she could also feel her own anger simmering in her chest – her mana responding automatically and flowing through her veins in an icy surge. These men had harmed innocents and endangered their city. What if they had killed Jerry or had harmed more of their people? Her rage was warring with her concern for Jason. Even now, Thorn might continue to hurt their people.

“I won’t argue with that,” she said in a cold voice, losing the

fight against her dark mana and the righteous anger that welled in her chest. “Besides, we need to know what Thorn is planning to do.”

“We won’t tell you anything,” one of the men interjected, but Riley could detect a faint quiver in his voice.

“You won’t have a choice,” Jason spat, whirling on the man and an evil grin curling his lips. “Before you came here, I didn’t understand the full scope of my powers, but I do now. You have Thorn to thank for that.”

Jason paced toward the cages. “The Keepers of old had not just the ability to raise the dead – to give new life – but also the power to touch the souls of their people. They could tease out memories, those secrets that we keep buried deeply.”

He leaned forward, and the two men inched back further. “I have been meaning to try this spell for some time now, but I haven’t had the opportunity. I don’t need your cooperation,” he murmured. “I will take the information I need by force.”

“So, what do you say? Who wants to go first?” Jason asked. Neither man said anything, but Riley could see the way their hands trembled, and they glanced at each other in fear. Torture was one thing, but what Jason was suggesting didn’t allow these two men any defense. How could they resist an invasion of their minds?

Without warning, one of the men darted forward, brutally smashing his head against the bars repeatedly. Blood soon stained the dark crystal and dripped down the bars. The man fell onto his back. A ragged gash had opened in his forehead, and his breathing was harsh and rapid. Yet, as Riley looked on, the wound slowly closed, and his breathing evened out.

“Killing yourselves is not an option,” Jason observed, seemingly unaffected by the man’s crude attempt to kill himself. “We administered multiple healing potions before placing you in the cells, and a friend of mine has created something new for just this sort of occasion.” He pulled a blood-red gem from his pocket. “The healing effects won’t save you from a truly fatal blow and it’s costly to recharge, but the ambient healing is enough to prevent you from harming yourselves too badly.”

The two agents stared at the gem as though it had the power to drain hope. The undead man slumped to the ground, cradling his head in his hands. Jason had won. He had backed them firmly into a corner. “That’s right,” he said in a taunting voice. “There is no way out. You have become that which you hate, and, as your final act, you will betray your own beloved Order.”

As he finished speaking, Jason’s hands wound through another set of gestures. They were similar to the movements for *Undead Devotion* but subtly different. Tendrils of dark mana wound around

Jason's hands as they moved, thickening as Riley watched.

As he completed the spell, the dark mana hardened and condensed into nearly solid tentacles of energy that reminded Riley of the tendrils that had once sprung from the mana well and snatched at her severed wrist. The mana raced across the room toward the zombie-like agent. The man tried to scramble away from the energy, pressing himself back against the wall. Yet he had nowhere to run, and this did nothing to slow the hungry mana.

The tentacles speared toward his face, the tips whittling down to needle-like points before stabbing into his bleached-white eyes. The man let out a tortured scream, writhing on the ground in pain as the other agent looked on with a horrified expression.

Then, as fast as the spell had overtaken him, the zombie's body went limp and the energy dissipated. The former agent now lay whimpering on the ground, his hands clawing at his own eyes. Riley turned to look at Jason, dark mana radiating off of him in waves. He watched the man dispassionately, not a trace of sympathy lingering in his eyes.

Jason turned to look at Riley. "It worked. Thorn didn't tell them everything in case they were captured, and the memories were blurry and unfocused. However, I have a sense of what he is planning. We don't have long now, and we need to prepare."

"O-okay," Riley said, her own mana faltering in the face of the cold rage that filled Jason's eyes. He turned and stepped away, not sparing a second glance at the Order agents.

Jason waved at the soldiers at the door. "Stay here and watch them," he ordered before retreating down the stairs.

Riley couldn't help but stare at Jason's back as he left, a trace of doubt filling her mind and momentarily pushing back at her own mana. Was this the same timid, kind boy that she had once known? It was almost like looking into the eyes of a completely different person. The testimony of Jason's parents returned to her. "This isn't our son," his mother had said.

At that moment, she couldn't help but wonder if they might be right. Had this game changed Jason? Had Alfred changed him? Or were these just the actions of a man pushed to his limit, both in the real world and in-game? A ruler faced with an impossible set of decisions and a constantly shifting moral line?

She wasn't certain how to answer any of those questions.

However, Riley could feel her resolve hardening as her gaze shifted back to the Order agents. Perhaps it didn't matter. They could face these issues once they were done. For now, they only had one objective: they needed to stop Thorn. At that thought, Riley stepped into the stairwell and followed Jason.

Chapter 55 - Besieged

Jason stood on the southern wall of the Twilight Throne. The stiff breeze that drifted over the stone barricade caused his cloak to sweep and billow behind him. Overhead, the dark clouds seemed to dance and swirl, as the occasional crack of thunder reverberated across the city. Even the weather around the Twilight Throne seemed to be anticipating the coming conflict. It seemed as though the entire region was responding to the threat that Thorn posed.

As his thoughts turned to their enemy, anger welled in Jason's chest and his fists clenched on the stone parapet. The bone plating of his magically enhanced armor scraped harshly against the coarse rock. He knew his rage wasn't entirely rational. The man had hurt his people, sure, but he didn't deserve this level of anger – neither did his henchmen. The truth was that Thorn represented something tangible that Jason could fight. Something he could control. Right now, he needed that.

Hundreds of soldiers lined the walls beside Jason, making last-minute preparations as the timer on Thorn's ultimatum continued to tick down in his peripheral vision – each second shaved off with an ominous sense of finality. Only a few minutes remained.

The undead would spare an occasional glance at Jason or bow as they passed to acknowledge his presence. He also noticed more than one group of soldiers talking in hushed tones and glancing in his direction. Word of the defeat of the two Order agents had spread, breathing renewed life into the undead and bolstering their spirits.

They only had one man to contend with now: Thorn.

Although, Jason knew that this wasn't exactly true. Which was why they were all standing on this wall above the southern gate, glancing nervously at the tree line in the distance. He couldn't quite understand the muddled memories he had glimpsed in the agent's mind, but the takeaway had been clear. Something was coming.

Shaking his head, Jason pulled up his notifications.

x1 Spell Rank Up: Undead Devotion

Skill Level: Beginner Level 2

Effect 1: Access to surface thoughts for 60 seconds. Additional levels allow the user to better penetrate the target's mental defenses.

He hadn't had an opportunity to use the spell's newfound application since he had transformed into a Shade. It had been a gamble to attempt this with the Order agent, but the result had been worth it. The agent had fought him, his will fighting Jason's own in a sort of spiritual tug-of-war. However, Jason had prevailed – likely due to his opponent's recent death and conversion to the dark.

The memories that had eventually come to him were cloudy and indistinct. He had the impression that Thorn had limited what he told his own men. Or, perhaps this was due to Jason's inexperience in using the ability. Either way, Jason had seen enough to give his people time to prepare.

"Hey," Riley said, stepping up beside him.

"Hi," he said softly, glancing at the archer.

Riley looked concerned as she watched him, but he also saw resolve and anger in her eyes. He couldn't really blame her for having doubts. He was aware of how his recent actions looked, but he couldn't do anything about that right now. He had learned his lesson with Gloria. If they were going to defeat their enemies – both here and in the real-world – they were going to need to get their hands dirty.

"The troops are in position as you ordered, and the preparations are almost complete," she reported. "Eliza and Cecil have nearly finished distributing the new equipment and potions," she added, motioning to the interior-side of the gate. Jason could indeed see a line of undead accepting last-minute equipment and pots from the timid mage. Cecil stood beside her, helping distribute the gear and smacking away the occasional hand that was a bit too greedy.

The pair's orders had been clear. They were to support the troops from the rear and tend to the wounded. Eliza's magic and skills made her extraordinarily useful, but she truly excelled in a support role. They also happened to be part of Jason's fallback plan if they needed to retreat to the keep – although he still hoped that it wouldn't come to that.

"And Jerry?" he asked.

"He has nearly recovered, although Grunt still won't let anyone close to him," Riley replied, shaking her head. "He might be able to participate in the battle."

"Good. We're probably going to need all of the help we can get," Jason murmured. "Speaking of which, Frank and I talked a day or so ago," he offered, a glance at his system UI confirming that his friend was online right now. Frank had been quiet lately, and his messages had been terse. Something felt off there, but Jason didn't exactly have the bandwidth to focus on that problem just yet. He had faith that Frank could handle the situation on his own.

"He won't be returning for this fight," Jason continued. "He's

still tracking Alexion.”

“Damn, we could probably use his help,” Riley murmured in reply. Her brow furrowed in thought. “Speaking of missing teammates, I also haven’t seen Morgan for a while. Her trainees reported for duty, but she has been mysteriously absent. I didn’t have a chance to stop by her school to check on her.”

“I’m sure she’ll turn up,” Jason answered, waving a dismissive hand. “She’s probably buried in a book or making last-minute preparations. Morgan’s never been great about taking instruction.”

“I’ve never noticed that about her,” Riley answered, sarcasm lacing her voice. This earned her a snort of amusement from Jason.

With that, the pair lapsed into a tense silence, both of them staring at the tree line in the distance, the gnarled branches of the dead trees spearing into the sky. Between them and the forest rested a barren field, the gray dirt still pockmarked and dented by the previous conflict with Alexion’s army. It felt like an eternity had passed since that battle.

Riley bit at her lip, belying her anxiety. “By the way, I’ve been meaning to ask what you saw in the agent’s mind,” she began hesitantly. “What exactly are we going to be fighting? This seems like a lot for one man... even if it’s Thorn that we’re talking about.”

Jason shook his head slowly. The short answer was that he wasn’t certain. “I got the impression that Thorn was planning to strike from the south. It was unclear what would happen – only that it would be something big. I’ve sent out scouts, but no one has returned yet.”

He hesitated for a second, trying to piece together the fragmented images he had witnessed in the agent’s mind. It was like a jigsaw puzzle where the edges of the pieces didn’t quite mesh together, and some were missing entirely. “I also had the sense that we interrupted Thorn’s larger plan. The other two agents were critical for some reason.”

Jason turned to Riley, a lopsided smile on his face. “I know that’s sort of vague, but it’s all we’ve got to go on. At least it was enough to give us a chance to prepare,” he added, gesturing at the undead lining the wall.

“Assuming this isn’t some sort of a trap,” Riley offered.

Jason grimaced. There was some truth to that statement. “You’re right. Although, I have a sense that Thorn has been underestimating me since our first encounter. I’m not sure whether he was aware of the Keepers’ ability to access memory – or, at least, he may not have known that I’m capable of using that ability. Or maybe he didn’t expect us to capture his men. There are just too many possibilities to be sure.”

Riley offered a noncommittal shrug. She didn't appear convinced. "It still worries me," she said. "This feels too easy."

"Oh, trust me, I expect we are in for a few surprises before this is over," Jason replied with a grim chuckle, his eyes hovering on the line of dead trees several hundred yards away. "At least we already have a 'plan B' if we fail to defend the gate."

Riley simply nodded, going quiet. Jason spared a glance at her, noting the worry on her face as she gazed at the tree line and the way her hands twined together anxiously. He reached out and placed his hand on hers. "It'll be okay," Jason said softly.

"Shouldn't I be saying that to you?" she asked with a ghost of a smile. "You've got more at stake here than I do. Nearly every player will be watching and waiting to see the outcome of this battle, and your city hangs in the balance. And that's putting aside everything else..."

"Maybe, but for some reason, I don't feel too worried," Jason interjected, not wanting to rehash his issues in the real world right now. "I have the council and our people. I have *you*."

Riley's lips arched into a genuine smile. "You know, you can be sort of sweet – for a homicidal ruler of darkness about to go to war with some unknown enemy."

"What can I say? I'm complex. I've got layers – sort of like an undead onion," Jason replied, matching her smile.

"Ugh. So, what you're telling me is that you're a decaying vegetable? Way to talk yourself up. This is probably a good time to mention that I'd like to keep my options open. You know, play the field a little," she teased, her smile widening as she gestured to the barren land on the other side of the walls. "The battlefield that is."

Jason couldn't help the inadvertent groan that left his lips at her pun. However, before he had a chance to reply, the timer in his peripheral vision struck zero. A call went up from the line of Kin, signaling that they needed to prepare. Weapons were torn from their sheaths to the discordant sound of scraping metal as their archers knocked their arrows. All eyes turned to the tree line outside the city as the Kin waited anxiously.

Jason felt Riley clutch at his hand as they stared at the dead forest, searching for any sign of movement. The seconds ticked by, lengthening and stretching almost interminably as the Kin shifted restlessly on the wall – a heavy silence descending upon the awaiting soldiers. Yet no sudden movements came from the tree line, nor did any shouts of warning spring into the air.

A hollow feeling began to settle in the pit of Jason's stomach.

Had he been wrong? Had this been a trap? Had he overcommitted to this gate at the cost of the other sections of wall?

Should he order the retreat now and make a stand at the keep? Or was Riley right and all of this was just some sort of ruse, intended to lure them to this gate? He had left scouts along the other walls, but no one had reported in yet. Could they be dead?

The doubts and fears cascaded and collided in his head, threatening to overwhelm him. As the seconds ticked by, he raised his hand, preparing to signal for his troops to fall back.

Just as he opened his mouth to issue the command, Jason's *Perception* picked out a faint blur near the line of dead trees. Before he could focus on it, the tantalizing blue glow disappeared. He almost thought he had imagined it until he saw the same blur again, this time passing through the trees and streaking across the open field between the tree line and the wall. The figure was moving so fast that it was almost impossible to make out. What gave it away was the ominous aura of dark mana that seemed to radiate from the figure in waves, leaving a trail of obsidian energy in its wake as it dashed through the open expanse.

"What the hell is that?" Riley murmured. She automatically released Jason's hand and nocked an arrow, sighting along the shaft.

"What do you see?" Jason asked.

"I-I think it's a man?" Riley said softly, her voice questioning and uncertain.

There was only one person that could move that fast. That must be Thorn, but that did nothing to explain the strange aura of mana that was surrounding him. The Order shouldn't be able to use magic... Although, at this point, Jason wasn't certain that it really mattered. They just needed to kill him.

"Archers, fire at will!" Jason shouted, pointing at the fast-moving figure.

The Kin responded, releasing in unison and a hail of missiles suddenly streaking into the sky. The arrows buzzed through the air and streaked toward Thorn. They soon slammed into the ground all around him. The missiles barely slowed the man's movements – he wound through the cloud of dark projectiles in a serpentine blaze of dark energy.

He came to a halt only a hundred yards from the wall, completely unharmed. Standing still, Jason could finally confirm that it was Thorn – his body robed in gray bandages and his eye covered. His grizzled visage took in the wall and its defenders, and he seemed surprised to see that the Kin were prepared for his arrival. Jason's gaze was drawn to the source of the pulsating dark aura that surrounded Thorn, the energy emanating from a massive crystal held in his left hand. The gem seemed to radiate an almost palpable wave of energy and Jason could only guess at how much dark mana was

stored inside.

Thorn's mouth split in a grin as he stared up at the wall, but he made no attempt to communicate with the defenders – no final monologue or ultimatum issuing from his lips. This seemed odd. Most of their enemies seemed fond of last-minute rants. Yet Jason didn't spare much attention for Thorn's lack of flair, focusing instead on the gem in his hand. The crystal was the real puzzle here. It looked familiar, but it took Jason a second to recognize it. It was similar to the one that Frank had found in the nest of native undead...

Suddenly, Thorn's plan began to click together in Jason's head.

"Stop him!" he shouted at Riley.

It was already too late.

Even as Riley released her arrow, Thorn clenched his fist, crushing the crystal into a fine powder. As the gem was destroyed, a massive wave of dark mana was released, fountaining fifty feet into the air before slamming back into the ground and pulsing out in a malignant nova of unholy energy. If anything had been living in the barren field, it would have been destroyed by that wave of darkness. The energy kicked up a thick gray dust in a rolling surge of debris. Mana and dust soon crashed against the stone wall and shot up towards the defenders, crossing in front of Jason and briefly obscuring his vision.

As the energy began to dissipate, he could see that Thorn had vanished from the field. The defenders didn't have long to contemplate his disappearance. A rumble now came from the tree line, where the wave of dark energy was still stretching toward the barren forest, slowly breaking apart and beginning to dissipate. Within only seconds, dozens of shapes suddenly appeared among the trees, outlined in blue as Jason's *Perception* skill triggered continuously. Even as the first of the creatures broke the tree line, more continued to funnel into the open field in a never-ending torrent.

"They're undead," Riley murmured from beside Jason, sighting along another arrow.

Jason could see that she was right. A massive horde of skeletal creatures was streaming from the trees, their ivory limbs clawing at the air hungrily as they tried to devour the last traces of dark mana that filled the field, buying the defenders a few precious seconds to consider their new opponents. These weren't Jason's orderly creations. These were wild, chaotic creatures – spawned and hardened in the wild wastelands that surrounded the city.

Even more terrifying was the form the native undead had assumed. They almost looked human, racing along on bipedal legs. The undead must have continued to mutate, merging the missing corpses of the local townsfolk into their nests. Now they faced the

result of that unholy union of beast and man. Soulless black eyes glared at them, devoid of any intelligence and filled with a bottomless gnawing hunger. Jason could see evidence of their animalistic heritage. Their ivory limbs were bound together in thick layers and their fingers terminated in razor-sharp claws. Each of the native undead stood nearly seven feet tall, and their feet pounded the gray dirt in a thunderous rhythm.

The monsters seemed to be in some sort of frenzy, scrambling over each other as they attempted to claw ravenously at the concentrated tendrils of dark mana in the field, absorbing the mana into their skeletal bodies. Jason soon lost count as he tried to assess their numbers. There had to be hundreds of the creatures – if not thousands. A quick inspection revealed the following:

Enraged Ghouls – Levels 200-300

Health – Unknown

Mana – Unknown

Equipment – Unknown

Resistances – Unknown

Jason's thoughts raced as he began to piece together Thorn's plan. The Order must have been responsible for the way the native undead had begun to mutate out of control. That was the only explanation that made sense, especially after Frank had found a similar dark-mana crystal buried in the Wraithling nest. After allowing the creatures to ravage the surrounding towns and other native undead – swelling their numbers – Thorn must have then lured them here, using their hunger for dark mana as bait.

Yet the size of the horde was staggering. It would have taken Thorn days to gather the ghouls that now approached them – which also explained why he had been missing when they had confronted his accomplices. All of this clicked together in an instant, leaving Jason feeling incredibly stupid. How had he not anticipated this?

“Damn it,” Jason hissed. The only minor blessing was that without his accomplices, Thorn would only be able to attack one side of the city. That must have been what he had glimpsed in the agent's mind – that sense that the other two men were meant to serve some purpose. Although, this did little to make Jason feel better given the torrent of undead that continued to stream into the open field.

The Kin stationed on the wall shuffled anxiously as they watched the oncoming horde that was still barreling through the trees. There seemed to be no end to the skeletal creatures. The native undead in the field soon finished chasing the last traces of dark mana, the occasional scuffle breaking out among their ranks as they fought

amongst themselves for the last scraps of energy.

A few stray creatures sniffed at the air, as though hunting for more of the dark mana. Then, as one, the horde of ghouls seemed to notice the defenders on the wall. The ambient mana that resided in the Kin's undead bodies and the dense collection of energy that helped power and support the city seemed to call out to the native undead, drawing them like moths to a bonfire.

A sudden stillness descended upon the field, as the defenders and native undead observed each other. Then a roar of desperate rage and hunger erupted from the horde of ghouls, and the first line began barreling toward the walls, followed closely by the remainder of the native undead. Their clawed hands raked and gnashed at the air as their ear-piercing howls set the defenders' teeth on edge.

A blue notification suddenly dropped into Jason's vision.

Universal System Notice

The native undead surrounding the Twilight Throne have mutated out of control, stirred into a frenzy by their ever-present thirst for dark mana. The undead now stand at the walls of the dark city, threatening its inhabitants. It is time to atone for your sins and pray to your gods.

For true darkness has descended upon the Twilight Throne!

Chapter 56 - Overwhelming

“Archers, fire!” Jason shouted, his voice carrying along the ramparts.

The Kin shook off their surprise, nocking arrows to their strings and releasing as rapidly as they could. Meanwhile, the dark mages stationed along the wall joined the fray and needles of malignant energy streamed through the air. The collection of missiles – both mundane and magical – struck the front line of ghouls in unison, slowing their movements and piercing through their ivory limbs. As the initial wave of ghouls slowed under the barrage, the creatures behind them crashed through the front line. They stomped over the fallen and snapped limbs in their frenzy.

Riley moved closer to Jason and spared a quick gesture at the nearby contingent of Kin. They tightened their protective circle around Jason, creating a veritable wall between him and the outside world. Thorn might try to assassinate him amid the chaos, and, right now, Jason was sitting at his Control Limit, his health pool diminished by the cost of sustaining his minions.

Jason glanced at the interior courtyard behind the gate, sending a mental command to the handful of minions stationed below. Within seconds, giant ivory catapults were wheeled into position. Jason had taken some time to improve on the original design he had developed in the dungeon north of Peccavi. These skeletal siege engines no longer needed a crew of minions to carry them. Instead, they now rolled along on makeshift ivory wheels. This had substantially reduced the Control Limit requirements of the siege engines.

The nearby Kin hauled the corpse of a dead minotaur onto the bucket of one of the catapults – its hulking form lying limply on the surface and its congealed blood staining the bone a dark maroon. Jason had been hoping to use his limited supply of corpses sparingly. His *Corpse Explosion* couldn't be used on his skeletal creations, and so his ammunition was limited. Unless, of course, he wanted to start launching his own soldiers – a line he wasn't willing to cross. As he observed the onrushing horde of undead, he started to wonder if he might be forced to second-guess that decision. They were well past the time for caution or moral indecision.

This was about survival now.

Within moments, the first minotaur corpse was sent sailing through the air, its body tumbling end over end. It was soon followed

by its brothers. Jason's hands were already twining through a complicated series of gestures – tendrils of dark mana winding around his fingers as arcane words spilled from his lips. The projectiles struck the enemy line just as Jason finished casting his spell. Shadows of energy raced from his position, stretching across the battlefield until they reached the bodies of the minotaurs.

Explosions rocked the front line of undead, dark energy spewing forth in a nova of destruction. The blasts ripped apart the ghouls by the dozens, their limbs splintering and fragmenting. As Jason looked on with horrified fascination, he realized that the explosions also served a secondary purpose. The ghouls were drawn to the concentration of dark energy and the blasts served as decoys – causing the creatures to momentarily halt their headlong charge to tear hungrily on the wisps of dark mana that lingered in the air.

Even as dark missiles pelted the undead and explosions rocked their ranks, the attacks did little to blunt the wave of creatures. Despite killing them by the scores, there was a seemingly endless number of gnashing ivory maws and flailing limbs left to take their place.

Faster than he would have liked, the first ranks of undead made it to the city's walls. The forerunners smashed against the stone blocks, and their bones were ground to a fine white powder as the momentum of their fellows crushed them against the rock. Jason didn't know what he was expecting to happen next – perhaps for the undead to pile on top of each other and claw their way over their fallen brethren to scale the wall.

What he wasn't expecting were for the hulking creatures to stab their clawed hands into the stone surface, slamming their limbs into the wall with surprising strength and finding a foothold in the crumbling mortar between the blocks of stone. They began scaling the surface of the wall at an alarming speed, their ivory limbs cracking and stretching as they clamored up the wall.

Cries went up along the ramparts, and Jason's melee troops moved forward, armed with long spears – courtesy of Eliza's last-minute purchases on the player auction house. The undead archers withdrew, dropping from the rampart and assembling back into formation in the courtyard. Their missiles soon whistled overtop the heads of the defenders on the wall. The sound was only broken by the occasional explosion in the field outside the city as the catapults continued to launch their deadly payloads.

Meanwhile, the melee troops on the wall stabbed forward frantically, their spear tips slicing into the ghouls that were attempting to scale the wall. Now that their enemy had drawn closer, Jason could make them out more clearly – watching the battle even as he

continuously cast his *Corpse Explosion*. The ghouls almost resembled his Death Knights in size and strength. But where his creations used conventional weapons and were armed with spiked shields, the feral undead struck and tore at their enemies with clawed hands. They seemed to forgo any sense of defense or self-preservation, focused solely on their hunger.

As Jason looked on, one of the ghouls grabbed a Kin's spear, ripping the man from his position on the wall and sending him tumbling into the wave of bone that crashed against the base of the fortification. The soldier wasn't simply slain – his body was *ripped apart* like it had passed through a wood chipper. His blood sprayed into the air in a fine mist that stained the feral undead a dark crimson. Others soon followed him, their screams echoing along the wall before being abruptly cut off.

"We're getting overwhelmed!" Riley shouted over the din of the battle. She had slung her bow back over her shoulder, squeezing in with the other defenders near Jason as they tried to maintain a protective bubble around him.

Jason knew she was right. The ghouls were relentless, and he could only watch as more and more of their soldiers were ripped from the wall. He needed to replace their numbers and reinforce his troops, but he was still at his Control Limit. They were likely almost out of minotaur corpses to use as ammunition. He needed to act quickly.

Shit, he thought. He would have to use one of his backup plans. He had hoped to be able to delay this for longer, but there was no help for it.

With a thought, Jason summoned the remainder of his minions. "Dark One, please let this work," Jason murmured to himself.

* * *

The control room at Cerillion Entertainment was a flurry of activity, as technicians tapped away at their consoles and shouted at each other from across the room. A massive display hovered in the air, the screen split into multiple panels – each showing a different perspective on the epic battle being waged at the southern wall of the Twilight Throne. However, they all told a similar story. The native undead surged forward in a mass of ivory bone and unrelenting hunger as the defenders on the wall struggled to hold off the horde.

In the midst of this chaos, Robert sat calmly on the dais in the center of the room, his feet propped up on a desk and a bowl of popcorn resting in his lap. His eyes were fixed on the screen,

munching away as he surveyed the destruction onscreen.

“Are you going to help?” Claire snapped at him from nearby, swiping at her display as she side-eyed Robert in irritation. Instead of replying, he just shoved another handful of popcorn into his mouth – earning him a frustrated sigh from Claire.

The screens hovering in front of her flashed as data flowed in from their streaming network, showing the recent online activity for Vermillion Live. The universal system message had caused a massive influx of viewers as the players went online in droves to view the encounter. There were very few active players in the Twilight Throne and their channel was essentially the only way to witness the event. As a result, their site was already getting millions of hits. This was accompanied by increasingly frantic messages from their media director – the contents ranging from pleading promises to open threats.

“We need to get this footage over to Vermillion Live,” Claire continued, shifting her attention back to Robert. With a flick of her wrist, she brought up the comments and chat logs affiliated with their streaming channel. The list was updating so quickly that it was almost impossible to follow the conversation. “People are getting a little... desperate.”

Robert gave her a dismissive shrug, his gaze never wavering from the screens. “A few minutes won’t change anything. Besides, in your rush to toe the corporate line, you’re missing the more interesting question.”

“Which is?” Claire retorted, raising an eyebrow.

“Why now?” Robert murmured. “Why is this event happening now of all times? This wasn’t scheduled and you know as well as I do that only one person – or incredibly sophisticated AI – could be behind this.”

Claire glanced up at the screens, her brow furrowed in thought. She had to admit that it did seem strange. They were expecting the regulatory committee to make a decision at any time now and Jason’s testimony had been played and replayed on news channels almost continuously for the last couple of days – with warring camps forming around both the boy and his parents. Jason was already the focus of intense public scrutiny. Drawing more attention to him didn’t seem like it would help.

Even as she thought about Jason, the boy’s dark silhouette came into one of the frames and Robert enlarged the image so that it filled the screen. The Regent of the Twilight Throne was surrounded by his Kin, their black helmets covering their faces as they encircled him. Riley stood to his side, her bow glowing with an ominous crimson light. As she fired continuously into the horde, each of her

missiles detonated violently. Despite their efforts, they were slowly being overwhelmed, the ivory wave of undead crashing against the wall with terrifying force.

Claire opened her mouth to address Robert but suddenly stopped as she saw Jason shout something at Riley. Claire couldn't quite catch what he was saying since the sound was swallowed up by the swell of noise that filled the area. Before she could order a technician to clean up the audio, Robert had already swiveled around, and a few stray pieces of popcorn fell from his lap and bounced off the floor. A moment later, he had filtered the background noise, allowing Claire to hear what was happening onscreen. A hushed silence had descended over the room as the technicians forgot what they were doing – all eyes now riveted on the screen.

“...get everyone down,” Jason shouted to Riley, gesturing at the nearby Kin. The archer's eyes widened in surprise, confusion flitting across her face.

Not wasting any time, Jason turned his attention back to the city behind him and Claire's thoughts swam in confusion. What was he doing?

A swarm of pale specks suddenly lifted into the air, rising from the rooftops of the buildings along the interior side of the wall. Among the cloud, Claire could make out faint flashes of orange and red. It almost looked like Jason had summoned a cloud of evil, ivory fireflies. Under Robert's deft hands, the camera centered on one of the creatures and a low murmur drifted through the control room.

They looked like winged spiders, their torsos glowing with an eerie orange light that Claire couldn't explain. They beat their wings in a flurry of movement so quick that it caused their limbs to blur like a hummingbird. What was even more impressive was the size of the swarm. There had to be at least a hundred of the bug-like skeletons.

“Now what are you little beauties?” Robert murmured, a curious look on his face.

They didn't need to wait long to find out.

The swarm raced forward past the lip of the wall, before turning to face the fortification. A few of the Kin noticed the strange flying creatures, raising their heads to the sky. The Drones spread into a thin line, hovering in the air and waiting patiently. Jason's attention was trained on their flickering white forms as he stood unmoving on the wall.

Riley followed his gaze, and her eyes widened in alarm. She shouted a warning, her voice carrying across the wall. “Drone strike incoming. Get down!” The Kin scrambled to pull away from the edge of the wall without being slain by the feral creatures that were still scaling the stone surface. Most of the soldiers managed to evade the

ghouls, but more than one of the undead lost their life in the process.

Then Jason waved a hand, and the Drones struck.

They sped forward toward the base of the wall with terrifying speed. Several of the tiny creatures latched onto the ghouls, grabbing at them with their spindly, white legs. They slammed their torsos down onto their targets – their hole-riddled torsos crumbling. Others used a more direct approach, simply barreling into the ghouls and smashing themselves apart. As the creatures broke apart, explosions of flame ignited in a cascade of energy so powerful that the force actually shook the entire barricade – causing the camera to list and sway.

It was like someone had dropped napalm all along the fortification. The ivory bones of the feral undead were ripped apart and charred under the intense blast of heat, and the defenders were forced even further back from the wall, as a line of flames rocketed up into the air. The blasts threw any of the ghouls still clinging to the walls back to the ground below where they smashed into their fellows, creating a massive heap of bones and flailing limbs at the base of the fortification.

“Holy shit,” Robert said, his voice echoing across the suddenly still room. A delighted smile lit his face, his bowl of popcorn now resting forgotten on the nearby desk.

As the debris began to clear, the group in the control room could see Jason standing atop the wall, a massive mound of bone now resting below him. The charred remains of the undead were still burning, and tendrils of smoke drifted around him as he surveyed the destruction he had caused. What was most disconcerting was the calm ease with which Jason gazed down at the burning bones – as though this was simply another normal exchange. The screen froze on that image as Robert tapped furiously at his terminal.

“Okay, I think I get it now,” Robert said, an excited smile still painted on his face.

“Get what?” Claire asked in confusion.

“Why Alfred concocted this event.” Robert waved at the display over his shoulder. “That guy right there. He’s the person that everyone else is striving to beat – the pinnacle of power inside AO.”

He turned his head slightly, meeting Claire’s eyes briefly even as his hands continued to dance across his keyboard. “I thought for a moment that maybe Alfred was trying to *rebrand* Jason or paint him as some sort of innocent victim. That’s not it at all! Instead, he’s embracing what Jason is. He’s unbalanced as hell. He’s a player that constantly takes this world’s rules and twists them to his advantage. He’s merciless and relentless. In short, he’s the gods-damned villain of this game – the end boss.”

“I don’t get it,” Claire said, confused. “How does that help?”

Robert’s grin widened, and he tapped at his terminal, sending the footage on to Vermillion Live. Then he gestured at Claire’s display where their streaming channel’s traffic was being displayed. Within only seconds, the numbers jumped dramatically, their viewership increasing at an incredible rate, and they only continued to climb higher as the players circulated the video and it was picked up by other channels.

“Because, everyone that watches this clip is going to be thinking one thing,” Robert murmured, swiveling to stare at the frozen image of Jason that loomed above the control room.

“That could be me.”

* * *

Jason looked on in shock, his surprise causing him to momentarily freeze in place as he surveyed the destruction caused by his enhanced Drones. Smoking ivory bone now littered the ground below the wall, buying the defenders a momentary reprieve. The soldiers nearby looked on with stunned expressions, their pale eyes wide. Even Riley seemed taken aback and she stood with her mouth open.

After finding the Order agents, Jason had replaced the detection crystals inside the tiny creatures with the more common fire crystals that Cecil had managed to recover from the ruined crafting school, effectively turning each diminutive Drone into a flying bomb. The payoff had been worth it; more than a hundred ghouls had been incinerated in the blast and many more were now injured.

However, even this victory was short-lived.

As Jason shifted his attention to the base of the wall, he realized he had just created a new problem. Hundreds more undead were waiting to scale the surface of the wall, and between the blasts and the ghouls slain by his troops, the bodies were starting to pile up, creating a heaping mound of ivory bone fragments at the base of the wall that was beginning to act like a ramp. It would only be a matter of time until the feral undead were simply sprinting up this makeshift ramp and the defenders were pushed back from the fortification.

Jason’s mind raced. He needed some time to think.

“I’m casting my summoning spell,” Jason yelled at Riley, earning him a nod in response. He would be weakened after the spell ended and Riley and his troops might need to be able to carry him to safety.

His hands wound through the gestures of the spell, and guttural words streamed from Jason's lips even as the world began to slow to a crawl around him. He could see black projectiles slowly drifting through the air above him as explosions of dark mana erupted among the ranks of the ghouls, the malignant energy expanding at a snail's pace. At the base of the wall, the native undead were already beginning to recover from Jason's Drone strike, struggling back to their feet despite their missing limbs and the fractures that riddled their bodies.

Jason pulled up his system UI, confirming that he had freed up almost 100 units toward his Control Limit. The field below him glowed an almost blinding blue, identifying the materials available for summoning new skeletal minions. The obvious choice was to repurpose the bones in the makeshift ramp that was being formed along the base of the wall – which would help slow its formation. Yet as Jason examined those materials more closely, he realized that the growing ramp was composed primarily of bone fragments, the pieces too small to be easily repurposed.

His attention shifted to the horde of undead still barreling across the field toward the wall. There were simply too many. He could repurpose the larger bones at the base of the wall, which would reduce the size of the growing ramp and buy them some time, but that wouldn't solve their problem. More of the feral undead would perish, paving the way for their brothers to make it over the wall and into the city itself.

It was only a matter of time.

A sinking feeling was forming in Jason's stomach as he realized that they wouldn't be able to hold this position – not against this many enemies. His gaze shifted to the interior of the city behind him. What sort of destruction would the ghouls cause if they made it inside the Twilight Throne? Even with the civilians safely evacuated to the keep, they would destroy most of the southern quarter, rampaging through everything in their path. They would cut a swath of destruction through his city so wide and deep that it might take months to recover.

Even as that realization struck him, he knew he had no choice. If they made it through this, then they could rebuild. But, first, he needed to keep his people alive.

Jason turned his attention back to the field outside the city, his resolve hardening. He knew what he needed to do.

With a thought and a wave of his hand, bones erupted from the pile at the base of the wall, throwing the ghouls standing atop the pile hurtling through the air and slamming into the stone blocks of the fortification. Jason snatched a bag from his waist, pulling open the

drawstrings. A mound of glimmering orange and red crystals rested inside – the remainder of the fire crystals at his disposal.

Quickly, Jason began building.

Dozens of Death Knights began to take shape along the wall, the bones piecing themselves together simultaneously – forming sinewy limbs and the familiar spiked shields of his minions. Jason didn't have time to get creative, and he needed a creature that could withstand the onslaught of the feral undead – a creature that could buy them some time. The newly formed Death Knights shoved the Kin back from the precipice, their eyes widening ever-so-slowly in surprise as the undead formed in the air before them.

Once Jason hit his Control Limit, he ripped apart his catapults, adding as many defensive troops along the wall as he could. Then he made alterations to each minion, placing orange crystals inside each Death Knight's right foot. The creatures' hands were fused to their weapons and shields, so he needed to use a limb that they could damage at will. He could only hope that this would work.

Suddenly, Jason was finished with his preparations.

He surveyed his new creations and the feral undead that were already clamoring up the wall once again. He looked at the Kin as they backpedaled away from the newly formed Death Knights. He saw his people on the interior of the courtyard as they scrambled away from the ruined remains of the catapults. He noticed Eliza and Cecil standing on the road leading back toward the keep, ready to initiate their fallback plan. In the distance, the dark silhouette of the keep loomed above the city.

A lot was about to happen once Jason completed his spell. He was about to lose quite a few troops, the ghouls would destroy a large portion of his city, and they would be pushed back to their fallback position – forced to make a last stand in front of the keep. The weight of that decision hung heavy on his shoulders. Yet there was no other option.

“Let's do this,” Jason said, slamming his fist down on the control panel.

The world around him immediately lurched back into motion. A piercing pain wracked Jason's head – like someone was driving a pick into his skull. He had stayed inside the creation panel longer than he had expected and the feedback pain was unusually severe. He heard shouting around him, but he was having difficulty focusing on his surroundings – red notifications flashing in his peripheral vision.

He was lifted from his feet and sent barreling through the air. Jason hit the ground on the interior of the wall. Hard. The wind rushed from his lungs and brought on a fit of coughing, only making it more difficult to catch his bearings. Riley's face hovered in front of

him, her expression harried and her eyes glowing with unholy energy. Behind her, Jason could see the skeletal forms of his Death Knights on the wall, the rest of the Kin dropping from the rampart and landing all around him.

Riley yanked him to his feet and shoved him toward the roadway. She was shouting something, but he couldn't understand it. All he knew was that she was half-supporting and half-carrying him down the road, a small contingent of Kin forming a protective bubble around him. Despite the pain that wracked his head, Jason couldn't shake the feeling that he was missing something. Some final command he was supposed to give.

"Wait..." he said, struggling against Riley.

"We need to keep moving," she shouted.

"One last... thing," he grunted. "Plan B."

"I know. Cecil and Eliza are already in position," Riley replied. "We need to keep moving and get behind the first line of traps."

Jason just shook his head, shrugging off his soldiers and turning to face the wall behind him. His Death Knights still stood on the fortifications, barely keeping the relentless waves of feral undead at bay.

Just a moment longer, he thought. Not yet.

Even as he looked on, one of the feral skeletons leaped on top of a Death Knight, its clawed hands ripping at the bones that formed his minion's neck. Only moments later, the ghoul tore the Death Knight's horned head from its shoulders, roaring its rage into the night sky.

Just a second more.

More ghouls streamed onto the top of the wall. They were threatening to overwhelm his line of minions, and he could see more Death Knights fall. Riley was still shouting at him from nearby, the small contingent of Kin glancing nervously at him. They needed to retreat.

Now, Jason thought, issuing a simultaneous command to his remaining Death Knights.

In unison, each hulking defender slammed its right foot into the rampart with such force that it crumpled the bone and crushed the crystal embedded in its limb. A series of explosions rocked the top of the wall, blasting apart the Death Knights and any ghouls foolish enough to be standing nearby. The force of the blast rocketed out from the top of the wall, spraying ivory debris and dust in every direction. A wave of force crashed down through the street, momentarily throwing Jason off balance.

"Can we go now?" Riley demanded, not waiting for him to answer as she lifted him to his feet and practically dragged him down

the road. "The others have already evacuated."

Jason belatedly realized that she was right, and their small group was the only one still standing in the roadway. The rest of the Kin were rushing back toward the market and the keep. But there was still one more step in their retreat and Jason wanted to see this.

As he was half-carried away, Jason's attention was focused on the wall behind them. The ghouls had already recovered and were beginning to stream over the now undefended fortification before dropping to the street below and rushing between the buildings. They soon caught sight of Jason's small group, and a roar of rage ripped from their throats. The creatures clawed at the air with their hands as they raced forward.

As the first feral creature reached the roadway, glowing blue runes erupted along the length of the street. Jason knew that similar designs had been etched by Eliza and Cecil into every road leading back to the Keep – the small man feeding Eliza mana potions and advice as she set trap after trap. Spears of ice rocketed into the air, splitting the undead creatures' bodies in half. The ice soon towered over the roadway, creating a makeshift wall that bought the Kin a momentary respite during their retreat.

Jason felt worry sweep through his mind despite the numbing chill of his dark mana. The traps continued to trigger, and the ghouls began pounding at the icy surface from the other side, their forms shadowy and hazy through the semi-transparent material. Their fallback plan had worked, but he wasn't certain whether it would be enough. This was far worse than any of them had expected, and Thorn hadn't even made his appearance yet. Now that they had given up the wall, the Order leader could easily infiltrate the city and strike at any time.

Their only hope was that their traps would be enough to whittle down the undead before they reached the market, and that their last stand position was strong enough to withstand the attack that was coming. Because there was nowhere else to run.

Chapter 57 - Enraged

Frank shuffled uncomfortably, twigs pressing into his stomach and scratching his arms – a product of the barren row of bushes he was currently hiding behind. He had thought that he would grow accustomed to the discomfort the longer he sat in this hiding place, but that hadn't been the case. If anything, he had only become more irritable and pensive as the hours ticked by.

He heard a faint rustle nearby, evidence that the remainder of the Kin were stationed around him, perched on tree branches, and hiding among the dead trees. The group was positioned a few dozen yards back from the roadway leading into Kelton. This had been one of the first towns that Frank had conquered after Fastu, which meant there had actually been survivors.

They had followed Alexion's trail to the south, their enemy's progress slowed by the slaves in his caravan. It hadn't taken them long to catch up, but instead of trying to strike the group on the road, Frank and his lone division of Kin had used their mounts to circle to the west. They had passed Alexion's forces and set up an ambush at the next town where they could take advantage of its defenses.

Frank had made contact with the leadership in Kelton and explained the situation. The town's grizzled leader hadn't loved the idea of using his village as bait, but Frank also hadn't given him much choice. The man and his people had Jason to thank for their newfound immortality and the enhancements to their defenses – a favor that Frank had been forced to call in early.

As if the waiting wasn't bad enough, he had also seen the universal system message some time ago announcing that the Twilight Throne was under attack by feral undead. Since he now knew exactly what Alexion was up to, he guessed that Thorn was somehow behind the attack. That might also explain the crystal that they had found in the first Wraithling nest. He could only assume that Thorn had somehow been causing the native undead to evolve.

Although, he supposed that it was still *possible* that this could have all been some sort of distraction on Alexion's part. However, that seemed like overkill just to raid a few outlying villages.

Plus, that was giving Alexion far too much credit.

Frank glanced at the chat window in his peripheral vision, his expression worried. He had tried messaging Riley and Jason but hadn't heard back from either of them. That wasn't a good sign. Although, it wasn't like he could do anything about that right now. He

was too far away from the city to return in time to help, and he still hadn't completed either of his missions. Alexion was still pillaging their western border, and Frank hadn't received any sort of notification that Vera had conquered the final town.

He just had to hope that his friends would be okay on their own.

"Sir," Cisco suddenly whispered from beside him, causing Frank to jump slightly. The undead man had seemingly appeared out of thin air as he dropped from *Sneak*.

"Are they here?" Frank asked quietly.

"Alexion's forces should come into sight within the next five minutes," Cisco reported. "By our count, they have more than a hundred soldiers and have taken nearly fifty slaves."

Frank grimaced. Between his single division of soldiers and the Death Knight guards in Kelton, they had half as many troops. He wasn't counting the villagers. He had ordered the civilians to retreat to a nearby town to keep them out of harm's way. Even if Frank and his men perished here, he hoped that they could inflict enough damage to discourage Alexion from continuing his raid. He didn't have an endless supply of Confessors and Nephilim.

"Do they suspect that we're nearby?" Frank asked.

"I haven't observed any signs that they are preparing for our ambush and they haven't sent out any advance scouts," Cisco replied.

"Perhaps they're overconfident," Frank murmured. He couldn't believe that Alexion would be foolish enough to forgo scouts, but perhaps he had taken away a different message from the universal system notice. If Jason was occupied in the Twilight Throne, then Alexion likely thought he was safe.

Besides, even if they caught Alexion off guard, they were going to be relying heavily on their home turf advantage to make it through this battle. They were sorely outnumbered, and the Confessors were resilient – their regeneration healing them continuously until they ran out of mana.

Frank sighed. "The plan is the same. Wait for Alexion's forces to reach the gate and start to breach the town's defenses before we strike. As mobile ranged support, the Nephilim are priority targets. Have our mages curse the Confessors to slow them down."

"Yes, sir," Cisco replied. Before Frank could add anything further, the man had already vanished, leaving Frank alone once more – his only company his worried thoughts.

The minutes ticked by with painful slowness as the Kin awaited their enemy.

When Alexion's caravan finally made its appearance, it did so with little flash and fanfare. The group simply marched down the

middle of the roadway, globes of light hovering above the soldiers and pushing back at the murky darkness. A long line of manacled undead trudged along behind Alexion's troops, their heads bowed and their chains clanking in a discordant rhythm as they moved. The group made no effort to mask its movements – instead, loudly announcing its presence.

Arrogant asshole, Frank thought to himself. His guess must have been right. After the system message, Alexion didn't seem concerned about a fight. He wasn't even trying to launch a surprise attack on Kelton. Perhaps he thought he could get the village to capitulate without a fight.

If that was the case, he was in for an unfortunate surprise.

Frank felt his pulse speed up as the enemy force marched in front of his position, hoping that the desiccated line of bushes was enough to hide his bulky form. The seconds ticked by without any alarm going up among Alexion's group and his troops made no effort to search either side of the roadway.

As they passed, Frank could finally see the captured undead with his own eyes. Unhealed injuries riddled their bodies, and congealed blood seeped from gashes in their skin. Others were missing entire limbs. Alexion had apparently decided not to use any of his resources to heal the slaves, and Frank could feel a familiar anger bloom in his chest, pushing back at his habitual hesitation and doubt.

However, it was the sight of undead children bound in shackles that caused Frank's breath to hitch and his hands to clutch at the hilts of his axes. They were terrified, their eyes round as they watched the Nephilim that strode up and down their ranks. He saw the occasional parent carrying a child, struggling to hold their weight despite their own injuries.

Alexion is making slaves of children now? Is there any depth he isn't willing to sink to? Frank wondered, forcing himself to remain still and silent despite the rage curdling in his veins.

As though his thoughts had summoned him, there was a break in the line, and Frank caught sight of Alexion striding along inside the formation. He walked alongside a young woman dressed in fine leathers, and an impeccably dressed manservant hovered just behind them. The pair spoke glibly, unaffected by the gloomy atmosphere surrounding the Twilight Throne and the bound and broken slaves that trudged behind them.

Frank vowed to himself right then that he was going to give them something to worry about. Just not yet. He needed Alexion to commit his forces before they struck.

The caravan finally passed their location and neared the walls. As they arrived at the town, Alexion strode toward the gate, his heavy

plate armor gleaming in the unnatural magic light that hovered above the road. Several figures stood on the wall, their faces obscured by heavy cloaks.

“Hail, people of Kelton. My name is Alexion, and I am the ruler of the Crystal Reach. We are here to conquer this town and take slaves. I will give you one chance to surrender. Open the gates now, and we will spare some of you; you have one chance to protect your wives and children.”

He paused for a second to let this sink in. “If you do not heed my warning, we will burn this town to the ground and take all of you. Those that survive, anyway.”

As Alexion trailed off, a heavy silence descended upon the town. The figures on the wall made no move to respond. To be fair, Frank would have been surprised if they had managed to speak. It had taken them longer than Frank cared to admit to build the decoys – using clothing salvaged from the nearby homes to fashion their limbs. Although, it was worth it to see a gold-clad idiot try to intimidate a bunch of cloth dummies.

Alexion seemed to grow frustrated by the silence. “This is your last warning,” he declared loudly. “Your ruler Jason cannot save you. Make the wise decision.”

“Dumbass,” Frank murmured to himself.

He heard a soft snort of amusement and glanced to the side to find Cisco crouched beside him once more. “We are ready to strike,” Cisco said quietly. “We will move once you give the order.”

Frank just nodded, turning his attention back to the scene playing out on the road. Alexion must have finally reached his limit, because he waved a hand and his white-robed zealots marched forward, creating a line in front of the dark crystalline gate. Their hands soon began to glow with red and orange flames.

Only moments later, the energy blasted forward with tremendous force, splashing against the gate’s surface. At first, nothing happened, the flames having no discernable effect on the fortification. Yet as the seconds ticked by, the surface began to ripple and warp, and the substance peeled away and dripped to the roadway like black blood.

Just a little longer, Frank thought. They were draining the Confessors’ mana right now. Any energy they wasted on the gate was mana they couldn’t use to heal their own wounds. They just needed to wait until they breached the gate.

Frank noticed that Alexion was shifting uncomfortably, his eyes darting along the ramparts as the defenders made no move to intervene. Then his brow furrowed, and he whirled to face the dead forest behind him. His eyes skimmed the trees as though searching for

Frank's forces hiding in the bushes. He opened his mouth as though to shout a warning...

"Go," Frank finally ordered, his voice carrying through the trees.

A hail of missiles suddenly erupted from the tree line, whistling through the air toward the caravan. The wooden projectiles struck the exposed necks and backs of the unsuspecting Nephilim. White wings fluttered, and crimson blood spilled on the roadway as a wave of soldiers fell under the barrage.

Alexion's soldiers whirled to face the forest, flashes of white light going up among their ranks as they tried to heal their wounded and return fire on the trees – shooting at random. Yet more than one winged corpse now adorned the roadway. Another wave of missiles had already taken flight, soon finding purchase in the flesh of Alexion's troops.

Stray arrows struck the unsuspecting slaves, and Frank grimaced as he watched the helpless men and women fall. If they were to save any of them, they had no choice. There were no other options. This knowledge only served to fuel Frank's rage, his bloodlust threatening to boil over. Some of the slaves dropped to the ground, while others tried to struggle to the nearby forest, their chains soon bringing them up short. Yet the movement intensified the chaos among Alexion's ranks as the Nephilim were forced to herd the slaves while creating a defensive perimeter.

"They are attacking from the forest!" Alexion shouted. "Confessors to me!"

Frank watched as the flames faltered and the Confessors turned to face the tree line. The white-robed zealots had bored a hole in the gate, large cracks running through its surface. However, they hadn't brought it down yet.

"Damn it," Frank muttered.

Instead of a mad rush, the Confessors set up a familiar line facing the forest as new flames sprang from their hands. All at once, Frank realized that Alexion planned to wash their position in flames.

"Cisco, give the signal!" he shouted.

The man beside him lit one of his arrows, his flint sparking the cloth and oil wrapped around the tip. Then he launched it airborne.

He was too late. A massive column of flame washed across Frank's position. The dry and desiccated plants ignited like tinder, smoke already beginning to billow into the air as the fires spread at a frightening pace. The undead immediately dropped from their perches among the trees as they tried to flee the fire. Frank was with them, pushing through the thick smoke that now blanketed the area as the Confessors continued to blast the tree line. The only saving grace was

that the flames concealed their movements from the errant beams of white light.

The Kin knew what to do even without Frank and Cisco shouting orders. The group fled further back into the forest before regrouping and circling westward toward the town. Even as they moved, a howl went up from the trees on the other side of the road. The shouts of Alexion's soldiers and the cries of pain coming from the wounded Nephilim and slaves pierced through the crackle and snap of the flames that were sweeping through the forest.

Frank and his group broke through the tree line a moment later, coming out of the forest near the town's wall and flanking Alexion's troops in the road. They were met with a scene of chaos.

They had hidden their skeletal mounts in the forest on the other side of the roadway, and the town's Death Knights were stationed just inside the gate. At Cisco's signal, the wolves had bounded from the forest, and sped through the dead trees in a blur of movement before leaping into the middle of Alexion's forces from the north. They now gnashed at the Nephilim with razor-sharp fangs. At the same time, the Death Knights had crashed through the failing gate, sending splinters of dark crystal flying in every direction as they struck from the rear.

One wolf snatched a white-robed woman in its jaws, shaking her violently and crushing her skull. As it dropped the woman's unmoving body to the road, the wolf's torso was pierced by multiple rays of light as the Nephilim intervened. The Death Knights barreled toward the line of winged soldiers in a phalanx. The lead skeleton took ray after ray of the holy beams, the energy smashing holes in its shield and limbs. The lone Death Knight covered for its brothers, acting as cannon fodder to allow the others to get close. And then, the remainder of the Death Knights hit Alexion's line like a wrecking ball – sending soldiers flying in every direction.

The battle in the street took place in a chaotic flurry of movement, and, in the center of it all, stood Alexion. His body glowed with a golden light that enveloped his troops, causing their skin to shine with holy power, and allowing them to shrug off the occasional blow of the skeletal wolves. Alexion's hands moved through a complicated series of gestures, healing the men and women that encircled him in a protective formation as they blunted the initial charge of the skeletal wolves and Death Knights. His Nephilim alternated between healing the frontline soldiers and launching bolts of energy, slowly whittling down the undead.

Frank needed to move quickly if he was going to reinforce the wolves and Death Knights.

He spared a glance at Cisco. "Be ready to follow my lead. Try to

free the slaves if you see an opportunity. I'll distract Alexion and break their line."

Cisco didn't bother to answer – only nodding curtly before shouting a new set of orders. The Kin immediately moved into formation, yanking their swords free of their sheaths.

Frank's legs transformed with a sickening pop, and his kneecaps inverted, assuming their familiar wolf-like appearance. He also summoned his wings, and spindly growths erupted from his shoulder blades, feathers swiftly filling out the appendages. Then he launched himself forward. His surroundings blurred as he moved, and his axes appeared in his hands – lightning crackling along their metallic blades.

As Frank neared Alexion's group in the road, he spread out his new wings, using them to break his momentum. Before the first line of defenders could react, he flapped his wings powerfully, stirring up the dust along the road in a thick cloud. He kept this up, forcing his wings to flap ever faster as he strained to stand in place. Soon, a torrent of dust filled the air and obscured the battle raging in the roadway.

He could hear the roar of his Kin behind him as they made their charge, using the dust cloud to obscure their movements. The occasional stray flash of flame or ray of light rocketed out of the cloud but failed to find a victim among the undead soldiers.

Frank let his wings recede and got to work. He launched himself through the dust, his blades crackling with electricity as he wove a dance of death. A nearby Confessor was preparing to release a torrent of flame at one of the wolves, but he stopped the spell short – the man's head tumbling to the ground as blood fountained from his neck.

Heal from that, asshole, Frank thought.

Sensing something behind him, he whirled, and his blade just barely intercepted an incoming spear from one of the Nephilim. A sword ran the angelic soldier through a moment later as the Kin joined the battle behind Frank.

By then, the cloud of dust had begun to settle, and Frank was able to reassess the battle. Alexion's defensive formation had been destroyed, and chaos now reigned over order as pockets of fighting had broken out on the road. Frank spotted their enemy's glowing metallic form nearby. Alexion had picked up a shield from one of his soldiers, and he wielded a longsword in his other hand, its blade already drenched with congealed blood and coated in ivory dust. His glowing aura still enveloped himself and his soldiers, empowering their attacks and strengthening their defenses.

Frank needed to take out Alexion if they were to have a chance here.

His vision went red, and he finally let his rage overcome him. There was one person to blame for this conflict and Frank planned to teach him a lesson. With a thought, he shifted the elemental energy running along his blades to ice. The metal took on an unnatural chill as mist drifted from the blades.

Frank launched himself airborne, holding his axes high as his concentration honed on Alexion's back. Then he dove forward. At the last minute, one of the Nephilim shouted a warning, and Alexion turned. His eyes widened in surprise, and he raised his shield just in time. Frank struck the shield with both of his axes, the force of his blow so powerful that it sent Alexion to his knees and caused a concussive blast of force to rocket out from the impact, throwing the nearby soldiers off balance.

Frank didn't give his opponent a chance to recover, striking repeatedly, as the ice from his blades seeped into the metal of the shield. A final blow shattered the shield, sending frozen fragments flying in every direction and knocking his opponent back. Breathing heavily, Frank stood over Alexion, watching as he looked up at him with a mixture of fear and anger. This was the asshole that had tormented Jason and Riley. That had mercilessly teased and ridiculed him for years.

And he wanted nothing more than to sink his axes into Alexion's flesh.

As Frank was about to deliver a final blow, a gust of wind suddenly knocked him away and sent him tumbling backward. He recovered quickly, twisting his body in midair and managing to land in a crouch. He looked for the source of the attack and saw the young woman and her manservant suddenly standing near Alexion. Tendrils of yellow energy surrounded the manservant's hands as he stared at Frank – no alarm or concern marring his expression despite the battle raging in the roadway.

Air mage, Frank thought. He hadn't fought many mages with that discipline.

Alexion rose to his feet, calmly healing his own wounds with a simple gesture before turning his attention back to Frank. "Hello again, Frank," he sneered. "I didn't expect to see you here. I suppose Riley and Jason must have realized you were dead *weight*, huh? They must have grown tired of carrying you."

Frank could feel his anger boil at this comment and the not-so-subtle jab at his weight. "I'm sure they'll be fine," he grunted. "Besides, I'm more than enough to handle you."

Without waiting for Alexion to reply, Frank launched forward again. He was already anticipating the air mage's spell and neatly sidestepped the next gust of wind. Yet as he moved to the side, he felt

something tear at his skin – long bloody tracks running up his chest and arm. He grunted in pain and came to an abrupt halt.

“What the hell,” he muttered, his blood dripping onto the roadway.

“Air magic is a real bitch,” the woman beside Alexion said in a glib voice, gesturing at the man beside her. “Did you know that the more proficient mages can condense the air into something resembling a blade? To make it even more fun, the attacks are nearly invisible. Frederick here has mastered the art.”

Frank grunted, ignoring the dull burning in his chest. He spared a glance at his health in the corner of his vision, noting that he was already sitting below half. In contrast, he was certain Alexion had already healed himself back to full health. He needed to be careful.

His next charge was more tentative as Frank focused on sensing the manservant’s attack. He was watching Frederick’s movements closely now, waiting for any tell that might give away his angle of attack. All Frank noticed was a twitch of the man’s fingers and a gust of wind before he felt a jagged tear open in his back as though a sword had slashed along his spine.

“Tsk, tsk,” the woman beside Alexion said with a sneer. “You’d think the left hand of the Regent of the Twilight Throne would be a bit smarter than this.”

“Frank has never been the brightest,” Alexion said, laughing lightly.

Frank didn’t bother to respond as he tried to think of his best play here. He couldn’t anticipate Frederick’s attacks and he was running out of health. Even if he could get in a good strike, Alexion could simply heal the injury if he didn’t manage a killing blow. To make matters worse, Frank could see the fighting around him was beginning to wind down, the undead soldiers taking a beating in the face of Alexion’s superior numbers and healing.

Attack or retreat? he questioned himself.

Then he saw Alexion’s sneering expression, as though the man could anticipate his thoughts. The remains of undead soldiers and slaves riddled the roadway around him, their bodies unmoving even as the surviving slaves tried to drag the dead toward the tree line. That was all it took for him to make a decision. They might lose here, but they just needed to hurt Alexion so badly that he gave up this raid. That was the only goal.

Frank abandoned conscious thought, acting solely on instinct as he launched his final charge, using his wings to help launch him forward. As he saw Frederick’s fingers twitch, he abruptly stopped and swept his wings forward, beating them like he had when he initiated the fight and calmly continuing his march toward Alexion’s group. A

strong blast of wind swept forward, throwing his enemies off balance and causing them to blink rapidly to clear the dust that was kicked up into the air. Seconds ticked past, but no blow landed – the manservant’s eyes widening in surprise as he realized what Frank had done.

Even Frederick’s ability had limits. The man was unable to form a condensed blade of air due to the massive gusts of wind created by Frank’s wings.

Without warning, Frank stopped flapping his wings as he launched himself forward on his enhanced legs. He aimed his strike at Alexion, the gold-armored man raising his sword to block the blow with a smirk. However, at the last minute, Frank used his wings to change his trajectory, shifting his focus to Frederick and performing a barrel roll as he shifted in midair. The man moved to dodge, and the gesture barely saved him.

One of Frank’s axe blades missed, while the flat of his other axe clipped Frederick’s head – sending him sprawling. Even as Frank’s feet touched the ground, Alexion was on him, his blade dancing toward Frank with inhuman speed. Frank barely countered with one of his axes, only to feel the blade sink into his shoulder on the next stab. Alexion was fast. Extremely fast.

“You think Frederick is the only thing to fear here,” Alexion spat, his dead eyes glaring at Frank as he stabbed at him again and again. Without a shield encumbering him, his movements were precise and blazingly swift despite his golden plate mail.

It was all Frank could do to keep up with the barrage of attacks, the occasional blow shaving away his health. He scored a hit or two of his own, but Alexion healed the injuries in a flash of white light. This was a battle of attrition and one that Frank abruptly realized he could not win.

In a final move, Alexion knocked aside Frank’s axe, and his blade sunk into Frank’s stomach.

Frank abruptly fell to his knees, red notifications flashing in his peripheral vision as Alexion loomed over him. He could barely move, and he suddenly realized his stamina was all but empty. The multiple transformations had cost him dearly. He let out a groan of pain as Alexion jerked his blade free and blood jetted from the wound.

“To be expected of a fat idiot,” Alexion sneered. Then he leaned forward, his glowing golden eyes holding Frank’s. “Look at how your men have fallen and how easily we bested you.”

Frank could see the truth of his words. Nearby, the last of the Kin was impaled on one of the Nephilim’s spears. His troops were dead. They had lost. Frank could feel despair well in his stomach and guilt pressed down on his shoulders like a tangible weight.

“You will always be useless,” Alexion sneered.

Then he seemed to shrug. “Although I suspect you are too stupid to learn your lesson. Oh well, better luck next time!” Alexion said, raising his blade and preparing to deliver a final blow.

Before he could swing his sword, however, a series of notifications suddenly dropped into Frank’s vision, and he saw Alexion hesitate – his eyes focusing on something that Frank couldn’t see.

Quest Complete: Prime Real Estate

After being appointed as the Regent of the Twilight Throne, Jason was tasked by the Old Man with taking control of the surrounding lands and cities that were once part of the Kingdom of Lusade. Jason then imparted this quest to you, his left hand. He sent you on a mission to conquer the outlying towns and villages. Congratulations, that quest is now complete!

Universal System Message

Jason and his guild, Original Sin, have conquered the towns surrounding the Twilight Throne, turning them to the dark. Jason is the first avatar that has completed the task given to him by his patron deity. His reward is a gate piece – a relic of a time long past and a key to opening a bridge to the **Throne of the Gods**.

A new global quest has begun. The first avatar that reaches and conquers the **Throne of the Gods** will be given rulership over the world of Awaken Online. The remainder of the gate pieces are hidden throughout the world – only waiting to be discovered. Raise your armies. Train your soldiers. Spread your god’s influence to the four corners of this world.

The race is on!

“Pray to your false gods, mortals. Soon there will be no place for you to hide.” – The Dark One

Frank’s thoughts were wheeling in confusion, struggling to

process the notifications in front of him even as his vision wavered and blurred from fatigue. Vera must have just conquered the final town. Given that Jason was occupied with the siege in the Twilight Throne, he could only assume Vera had discovered that the last town was barren of survivors.

“What the hell is this?” Alexion muttered, his eyes skimming the notification in the air in front of him. “How did Jason do this if he’s under attack in the Twilight Throne?” He shook his head in confusion.

“It doesn’t matter,” Alexion said finally, his eyes refocusing on Frank and an evil smile curling his lips. “Tell me, Frank, where is the gate piece?”

Frank just spat on the ground, blood mixing with his spittle. “Fuck you,” he grunted. He had no idea where the gate piece was, but even if he did, he wouldn’t tell Alexion.

A brief expression of rage flitted across Alexion’s face before settling back into his neutral mask. “Fine. I will find out on my own. Goodbye, Frank.”

As he finished speaking, Alexion lowered his sword, the muscles in his arms knotting as he prepared to lunge. A heavy weight settled in Frank’s stomach as he saw the blade plunging toward his throat, the weapon drifting forward as though in slow motion. Yet he refused to look away or show any weakness. He was resigned to his fate. The only blessing was that he had likely inflicted enough casualties to force Alexion to call off his raid. A bloody smile curled Frank’s lips. At least, in that regard, he had scored a small victory.

Just before the blow landed, the ground suddenly lurched to the side, throwing Alexion off balance and causing his strike to go wide. The blade raked across Frank’s shoulder in a searing hot line, shaving off even more of Frank’s waning health.

The cause of the tremor soon became apparent. The ground in front of Kelton was trembling violently, large cracks forming in its surface and forcing Alexion and his group to back away quickly – abandoning Frank to his fate. Frank knelt in the dirt and his own blood, watching as the rents in the earth spewed a fountain of dark energy. The mana rocketed into the sky and immediately consumed the globes of artificial light that hovered overhead. The energy cascaded across the sky before raining back down in threads of darkness.

Enormous ivory bones soon followed, splitting through the ground and showering dust and debris into the air. Frank sat frozen in shock as he watched the material erupt from the ground. He soon realized that the bones were connected, forming a massive skeletal hand with its palm raised to the sky. Only seconds later, the hand

came to a stop directly in front of Frank – faint aftershocks still causing the ground to tremble.

As the debris began to clear, Frank could make out something resting on the palm. It was a jagged fragment the size of a small car. The surface seemed to glow despite the lack of light, giving off an unnatural sheen. The interior of the object was comprised of jagged, harsh edges, while the outside was curved in a smooth arc as though it might have once been part of a single circular structure. It was clear that this was a small part of a larger whole. A fragment.

A gate piece.

Chapter 58 - Fortified

By the time that Jason and Riley made it back to the market, Jason's head had stopped pounding, and his vision no longer swam. He had quickly shrugged off the help of the nearby soldiers, sprinting along with Riley and the Kin as their feet pounded the cobblestones. The frustrated roars of the feral undead echoed through the city behind them. Eliza's traps had worked wonders, buying them several precious minutes to regroup. The icy spears continued to erupt along the roadway with a flash of sapphire light, as the hulking feral skeletons tore into their surface with their claws.

Jason and Riley didn't have time to talk, their breath coming in ragged gasps as they rushed forward. They shared a worried glance as they saw the universal system notice regarding the gate piece. Jason could only assume that Vera had finished the quest he had given Frank while his friend was busy dealing with Alexion. Questions bounced through his head. They had secured a gate piece, but what did it look like? Or, perhaps more importantly, where the hell was it? As usual, the prompt had been short on details.

Unfortunately, they didn't have the time or resources to deal with that problem right now – a point that was made abundantly clear as they heard the crash of ice striking the roadway behind them. The ghouls had taken down another barrier.

As the market came into view, Jason observed the fortifications that had been built into the roadway. Towering pillars of wood had been embedded into the cobblestones, spanning nearly twenty feet into the air. No gate or other entryway riddled the surface of the makeshift wall. These barricades weren't meant for convenience so much as necessity. Instead, the Kin on the ramparts dropped ropes to allow the fleeing soldiers to shuffle up the wall.

His troops split to make room as Jason and Riley approached, allowing them to pass and shimmy up the ropes. As he crested the wall and stood on the rampart on the other side, Jason finally had a chance to survey the market proper. It had been several hours since he had seen the construction – having delegated this task to Cecil. The small engineer had immediately conscripted the hulking minotaur zombies to build makeshift walls in each of the three main roads leading into the market. Behind these walls were hastily constructed ramparts – allowing the defenders to pace the wall and keep their eyes trained to the south as they watched for the ghouls.

In the interior of the market, the stalls were now gone. The

wood had been repurposed to add to the temporary barricades. The courtyard was filled with undead soldiers. Archers assumed their formations in the center of the market and their melee troops created a semi-circular line in front of them facing the barricades.

On the far end of the market, near the entrance to the keep, was a mound of ivory bone – all that remained of the materials that Frank had salvaged from the Wraithling nest. Jason had used a surprising number of materials to create his new and improved Drones and the updated catapults. This was all he had left to work with, short of slaying more of the feral skeletons that threatened the city.

Jason's thoughts were interrupted as Jerry abruptly appeared beside him, with Grunt's hulking form looming in the background. "Fashionably late as always," the innkeeper remarked with a waggle of his eyebrows. "To be expected from our favorite evil overlord!"

Riley rolled her eyes. "Jason decided to deviate from the plan at the last moment. He almost got us killed."

"And took out more of the ghouls in the process," Jason retorted, grinning at their teasing. It helped to ease some of the tension that hung over his shoulders like a palpable weight. He turned his attention back to Jerry, inspecting him carefully. "How are you doing?" he asked. "Are you up for this?"

Jerry inspected himself, running his hands across his body. "All my pieces seem to be working – minus one, of course. But I won't elaborate since we have a lady present," he added in a conspiratorial whisper. This earned him a snort from Riley and Jason could have sworn he saw Grunt roll his eyes, but he could have imagined it.

"Anyway, you have one more meager thief to add to your ranks!" He relaxed his posture and leaned close to Jason with a grin, sparing a meaningful glance at Grunt who hovered nearby. "You should be more worried about Grunt. He's always been the jealous type, and I think he's reluctant to let these ghouls get a piece of yours truly."

Jason shook his head. "I'll be sure to let him know he needs to contain his feelings," he responded dryly.

"I hate to break up this reunion, but there is a horde of feral undead barreling toward this position, and we only have a few minutes," Riley reminded them. "We need to get ready."

"The troops are already stationed along each barricade, and the remainder of the troops have assumed formations in the interior courtyard," Jerry reported. "And, as you can see, we also brought some party favors," he added, waving at the pile of bone at the back of the courtyard. "Limit one per person, of course."

Jason spared a glance at Riley, an unspoken message passing between them. Nodding in unison, they both dropped from the wall,

landing with a soft thump on the cobblestone courtyard and leaving Jerry to mutter to himself as he followed them.

“Thank you, Jerry!” the innkeeper muttered to himself. “We really appreciate you coming back from the brink of death to help set up these lovely defenses. What would we ever do without you? Our lives would truly be joyless and devoid of meaning.”

Jason and Riley ignored his teasing as they made their way to the ivory pile near the back of the courtyard, the Kin parting before them like the waves of a dark sea. Despite Jerry’s light tone, Jason couldn’t ignore the fear that lingered in his soldiers’ eyes. This had been their fallback position, and the dark keep looming over the market housed their families and loved ones. If they lost here, it was only a matter of time before the undead breached the keep’s fortifications and then there wouldn’t be anyone – or anything – left to stop their advance.

And that was still ignoring Thorn, who had yet to make his appearance.

“What are you thinking?” Riley asked quietly, trying to keep her voice from reaching to the nearby soldiers as they passed.

He knew that she was asking whether he had a plan for what was coming. He could still visualize the nearly endless wave of feral undead that had bashed themselves against the stone walls of the Twilight Throne. Those skeletal monsters would soon be crashing against their makeshift wooden barricades – which were dramatically less sturdy.

“I’m thinking our chances are terrible,” Jason murmured. Riley bit at her lip, worry clouding her eyes. However, she held her tongue. She had witnessed the battle at the southern gate just the same as he had.

As they reached the pile of bones, Jason turned to look back over the courtyard. The feral undead would be coming from the south, and the barricade they had crossed to enter the market would likely be hit the hardest. The eastern and western roads had been fortified as well and would probably be attacked as the feral undead spread out across the southern line of buildings that ringed the market. There was only so much space available on the southern exposure; it was just a matter of time before the undead searched for other ways to enter the market.

Jason glanced at the buildings lining the courtyard. The structures might hold for a while, but they couldn’t be certain whether the undead would breach their walls or just scale the buildings, allowing them to avoid the barricades that lined the streets. The memory of the way the feral skeletons had used their claws to climb the stone wall ringing the city was still fresh in Jason’s mind. That

likely explained why Jerry had stationed several divisions in the interior of the courtyard instead of placing all their troops at the makeshift barricades. They were there to pick off the stragglers that found another way inside.

Jason eyed the small pile of bones beside him skeptically. He could build a dozen or so Death Knights with his remaining resources, but he wasn't certain there was room in the tight courtyard for more troops. Besides, even if the ghouls came in over the tops of the buildings and some slipped through their defenses, they either had enough troops to handle them – or they didn't. A dozen or so Death Knights wouldn't change that. Which meant Jason was probably better off using his remaining resources to bolster his own strength.

It was about time. He was ready to put his newfound combat skills to use.

Eliza and Cecil chose that moment to make their appearance, jogging up to the group and looking a little flustered. "The last of the troops have made it back to the market. We're ready, or at least as ready as we will ever be," Cecil grunted.

"We've set more traps on each road leading into the market," Eliza chimed in. "At Jerry's instruction, I focused on the southern road."

"Great," Jason murmured, still distracted as he considered what he was going to build. He forced himself to focus on Eliza and Cecil. "I think you two will be most useful along the southern wall, since that's where we'll be hit the hardest. Eliza can provide healing and buffs with her mist, and she can retreat further into the courtyard as we pull back the wounded. If there's no one to heal, summon new traps to try to disrupt the enemy's line. This isn't about killing the undead; it's about surviving for as long as we can," Jason said. He could practically hear Rex's voice as he spoke these final words. It seemed he was going to be putting his lessons in the first challenge to work sooner than he had realized.

His gaze shifted to Cecil. "Keep a group of the minotaurs with you and try to reinforce and patch the barricades as best you can." This earned him a skeptical look from the engineer, but he gave a curt nod of acknowledgment.

Jason realized that this plan would likely just push more of the feral undead to the other roads or overtop the buildings ringing the market – but they had no other choice. Their forces stationed in the interior courtyard would just need to stay alert.

"The three of you can stick with me," he continued, turning his attention back to Riley, Grunt, and Jerry. "We'll be stationed in the center of the courtyard. That should let us take out any ghouls that make it into the market, and we'll be in a good position to reinforce

one of the barricades if they falter or fall.

“Any questions?” he asked, meeting each person’s gaze, and receiving only curt nods in return. As his eyes swept over the group, Jason did a double take. Every member of the Shadow Council in the city was present, absent one person. “Wait. Where’s Morgan?”

The group looked around in confusion, realizing that the dark mage was nowhere to be seen. “I think I last heard that she was marshaling the mages at her school and evacuating the last of the students,” Eliza offered timidly.

Jason grimaced. Of all times for the dark mage to buck his orders, she had to choose this moment? What could she possibly be doing that was more important? He made a mental note to have a frank discussion with Morgan about her priorities once this was over – assuming they survived, of course.

An enraged roar went up from the south, sending a shiver down Jason’s spine. The sound had grown much closer. They didn’t have time to dwell on the dark mage’s absence or to waste talking. He needed to act quickly. Without warning, his hands launched through the gestures of his *Custom Skeleton*. The world soon began to slow to a crawl around him, his teammates standing like frozen statues nearby.

He turned to face the meager pile of bones. He had to make a decision. Did he create a few more minions or try something different?

A glance at the control panel hovering before him revealed a design he had been tinkering with on and off over the last few weeks, the translucent blue forms of over a dozen minions rotating slowly in the air. He had come up with an idea after unlocking the new ability for his staff – which allowed him to sacrifice summoned creatures to empower his *Soul Slash*. He had also been thinking a lot lately about the time he and his team had confronted Flowerface in the dungeon north of Peccavi, where he had repurposed the Hydra bones into a suit of armor. The suit had been rigid and unwieldy, but effective.

His *Bone Armor* only covered some parts of his body – the plating leaving his joints, large portions of his limbs, and his face unprotected. On top of that, while his melee abilities had certainly improved, he knew he would never be a true match for Thorn in a one-on-one fight. At least, not without a little cheating. His new design was meant to compensate for some of those weaknesses.

On the other hand, these new minions were completely untested. He wasn’t sure how well they would function in practice, and mid-fight was the wrong time to find out that his designs didn’t work. His gaze shifted to the south, where he saw another flash of blue, the light flaring in slow motion under the time compression of his spell. The horde was coming, and he was under no illusions about their chances of surviving this. Maybe it was time to roll the dice one

more time.

Resolving himself, Jason launched into motion, the pile of bones erupting in a shower of ivory as he mentally directed each piece into place.

I hope this works.

Only moments later, his palm slapped down on the button on the control panel and the world jerked back into motion. Excess bones rained against the cobblestones all around Jason, revealing the set of new minions that crouched in front of him. They didn't look like much. At first glance, they almost appeared to be a variant of his new Drones, but their bodies were oddly shaped and non-uniform. They were also missing their wings and skittered along the ground on thin, skeletal legs.

"What are those things?" Riley asked, her brow furrowed in confusion. The other members of the Shadow Council were similarly puzzled.

"I think it might be easier to show you," Jason replied, cradling his head in a vain attempt to ward off the pounding headache brought on by the spell.

He issued a single mental command, and the misshapen minions immediately scuttled toward him, crawling up his legs and torso with their gangly limbs. Two of the creatures swiftly encircled each of his legs, and their skeletal bodies interlocked with the existing bone plates on his thighs and shins. Four more crawled up his torso, fastening together to form a bone cuirass that accentuated and reinforced his regular *Bone Armor*, covering every unprotected inch of his chest. More of the creatures locked themselves into place along his biceps and forearms, spikes of bone appearing along his elbows and tendrils of ivory running across the tops of his hands.

Then came the final piece. Jason bent over and picked up the single creature which had remained sitting on the ground. Its legs splayed open, as though waiting for him. He slowly lifted the skeleton to his face, feeling its spindly limbs lock around the back of his head as the market was briefly obscured from view. As the creature shifted into position and his vision returned, he looked back at his teammates, noting their shocked expressions.

From the outside, it looked like he was covered from head-to-toe in thick plates of bone, the new creatures interlocking with his regular *Bone Armor* to create something like ivory plate mail. His feet crunched against the ground with each step, and the plates grinded together slightly as he tested his range of motion. Atop his head rested a skull-faced helm, ivory spikes framing his natural horns and his eyes melting away into soulless black pits. As a finishing touch, he summoned his bone shields using his remaining materials, and the

three circular discs soon orbited him slowly as he held his staff in hand.

He looked like a dark god, ready for battle.

As Jason met Riley's eyes, he saw a mixture of surprise and awe coloring her expression.

"It's a little heavy, and I can already feel some areas that I need to tweak, but I think it'll work," he offered as the others just stared at him. He was able to compensate for the added weight to some extent since his minions dynamically shifted with each movement, but the armor still limited his speed and range of motion.

"It certainly looks impressive," Riley offered, still staring at him. He could see that the members of the Shadow Council and many of the nearby Kin were doing the same – their eyes wide as they surveyed his new armor.

"Now you finally look like the Lord of Death we all know and love!" Jerry announced, smacking him on the back and wincing slightly as his hand collided with the dense bone.

"We'll see how it works in practice," Jason replied noncommittally.

As he spoke, he brought up his Summon Information, fiddling with the menu until it categorized the minions by limb. He had roughly three of the creatures on each leg and arm and four more hooked to his torso, combining to a total of 17 summoned creatures. The mana reserve cost of the minions and his regular *Bone Armor* shaved off about 2,000 mana, but this seemed reasonable when he factored in the added protection that the layers of defensive spells provided. He shifted this screen to his peripheral vision so that he could keep track of it. With more time, he might be able to redesign the UI to give him better feedback on the remaining health of his minions. However, the basics would do for now.

His preparations complete, Jason returned his full attention to his teammates. "We need to get in position," he said, focusing on Cecil and Eliza. They both gave a curt nod and then jogged off toward the southern barricade.

"Riley, Jerry, and Grunt, you're with me," he reiterated, as he stomped back through the line of Kin toward the center of the courtyard. "I'll need you to cover my back."

"Ahh, tell the truth, we're just your favorites," Jerry retorted.

"One of us maybe," Riley said with a raised eyebrow.

Jason was certain he had seen Grunt roll his eyes this time and he stifled a chuckle. Then his attention focused on the southern barricade. In the distance, Jason could see flashes of blue as the undead continued to trigger Eliza's traps, the explosions of energy growing ever closer. This fact wasn't lost on the Kin, and his troops

shifted nervously, glancing at each other in concern.

Jason hadn't missed the irony of his situation. Although it felt like an age ago, he had once stood on the other side of the market, watching as his feral zombies crushed the corrupt soldiers and residents of Lux. Now he was on the defending side, holding out against a similar attack from Thorn. But where the previous residents of the city had failed, he intended to succeed. They would not fail today – they couldn't.

"Kin," his voice boomed over the market. All eyes turned to the center of the market.

"Today we face our greatest challenge. The enemy isn't just knocking at our door; it's threatening to destroy our *home*. To take our families. To reduce everything that we have built to ash.

"But we won't let it. Here we stand firm. We will put everything on the line to protect our city. We are the strongest military force this world has seen. We have overcome everything that has been thrown against us. And we will prevail again today!"

He hesitated for a moment, letting this sink in.

"We will show the Order, and the world, what it means to fuck with the Twilight Throne – whether you are human or undead. Have no mercy and hold no fear in your hearts. Death is just the beginning!

"For we are Kin, and we are legion!" he roared. His voice carried over the market and was punctuated by the shouts of the feral undead as they grew closer.

Without warning, Grunt slammed his foot into the ground beside Jason, causing the cobblestones to crack as he maintained a steady rhythm. He released a harsh bellow, his voice drowning out the cries of the ghouls. The remainder of the Kin soon followed Grunt's lead, stomping their feet and crying out, releasing their rage and fear and hope into the night sky.

Jason's dark mana pulsed and throbbed in response. Dark tattoos of energy crawled over his armor, and an icy torrent raged through his veins. Even the very clouds above the city seemed to respond to the cries of his people, swirling rapidly while lightning crashed through the murky vapor in a blazing, pyrotechnic display.

As the blue flashes from Eliza's traps grew closer, the first of the soldiers on the southern wall raised a cry of warning. A mob of the feral undead had made its way through the last of the traps and was now sprinting toward their southern barricade. The troops lining the barricade hoisted their weapons as they prepared for the assault, while curses and bolts of malignant energy erupted from the mages on the wall.

"Archers, prepare to fire!" Riley shouted. The Kin stationed in the interior of the courtyard nocked arrows to their bows in unison,

their tips all pointed southward. "Fire!"

A hail of missiles raced into the air, flying swiftly over the southern barricade. The cloud was so dense that it blotted out the sky above the market and an omnipresent whistling drowned out the cries of the ghouls. Then the arrows pelted the front line of undead racing toward the walls, crashing through their bodies. The occasional missile exploded in a nova of dark energy, briefly halting the undead charge. However, only moments later the feral creatures recovered and continued their headlong sprint.

And then they were at the barricade.

The wooden structure trembled under the assault of hundreds of ghouls as the defenders spread out, stabbing down at the creatures with their spears from atop the ramparts. Jason could make out Eliza and Cecil walking the base of the wall. The water mage's mist glowed an ominous red as she used her spell to heal the defenders.

Faster than Jason expected, he heard shouts go up from their scouts along the eastern and western barricades, the undead circling around the market as they were blocked to the south. He could also make out ivory forms creeping over the tops of the buildings ringing the market before racing across the tiled roofs toward the market itself.

Riley barked orders, splitting her archers. She kept most of her troops focused on maintaining the constant barrage on the southern roadway while assigning the remaining divisions to the eastern and western barricades, reinforcing the troops there. This left the melee troops positioned in the interior courtyard to handle the undead that were coming in over the rooftops. With a shout, the melee line advanced, their spears and swords meeting any of the feral undead that dropped from the buildings ringing the market.

In the center of it all stood Jason, his dark gaze taking in all of this at once. His urge was to rush to the melee line and enter the fray, but that wasn't the right move. His job was to lead and reinforce weak areas.

He didn't have to wait long.

A rush of several dozen ghouls made it over the rooftops to the southeast and immediately dropped into the market, threatening to overwhelm the unsuspecting troops waiting below. Acting on instinct, Jason was already moving, sprinting toward the melee line with Riley hot on his heels while Jerry took over directing the archers from the interior of the courtyard.

Jason watched as one of the ghouls dropped onto a soldier. The creature's claws tore into the Kin's body before ripping his arm from its socket – congealed blood dripping from the open wound. More of the skeletal creatures followed close behind, and the line of Kin

wavered and threatened to break.

In an instant, Jason was there. He swept forward with his staff, channeling *Soul Slash* a mere second before he struck. The blade of dark energy cleaved a skeleton's head from its shoulders. Before its lifeless body tumbled to the ground, Jason had already switched targets, swinging his staff with a level of speed and precision he would have thought impossible only a few short weeks ago. A bolt rocketed past him, blasting apart a skeleton that dropped from above – evidence that Riley had entered the fray. Instantly, they began to work in tandem. The feral undead fell before them in waves, and their troops rallied around the pair, pushing back the creatures.

Once the tide of ghouls slowed, Jason gestured to Riley, and the two retreated further back into the courtyard. In the time it had taken them to reinforce the line, Jason realized that the situation had worsened. The southern barricade was faltering under the endless waves of feral undead. The creatures seemed to have given up on scaling the surface of the wall, the hail of arrows, spears, and occasional explosion of ice managing to keep them at bay. Instead, they seemed to be clawing at the wood of the wall itself and the surrounding buildings – sacrificing themselves in their attempt to carve a hole into the market.

Meanwhile, the rush of undead coming over the rooftops hadn't slowed, and even more ghouls were pressing against the barricades to the east and west. Their numbers were far greater than Jason had expected after killing so many on the walls ringing the city.

Despite the onslaught, each position was holding – if only barely.

"If we manage to keep this up, we might be okay," Riley grunted in between firing off *Void Arrow* after *Void Arrow* at the nearby rooftops.

Explosions of black energy blasted apart the undead that streamed in over the buildings, giving the defenders in the interior courtyard a momentary respite. The soldiers used the reprieve to down healing potions and drag their wounded out of the way. Eliza had moved back to the center of the courtyard, using her healing mists to aid whole groups of injured Kin. As soon as they regained their feet, they were pushed back into the frontlines.

"You might be rig..." Jason began but stopped short as he heard a strange, choked roar come from the western barricade.

He turned his attention to the west just in time to see something truly massive barrel through the wooden fortification like it was made of tissue paper, pulverizing any of the feral undead in its way and tossing aside the wooden beams with barely any effort. The troops stationed on that flank scrambled to back away, trying vainly

to reform their lines. Even more strangely, the monster simply froze in place as soon as it cleared the barricade, allowing him to get a good look at it.

It was a thing of nightmares, its bloated body comprised of layers of decayed flesh that looked like they had been crudely stitched together. Its torso was a bulbous mass of rotten flesh the size of a pick-up truck, and Jason identified at least six arms, the limbs attached at awkward angles. It was an abomination of dark magic that felt out of place amid the ivory bodies of the feral undead.

A quick inspection revealed the following.

Rotten Abomination – Level 315

Health – Unknown

Mana – Unknown

Equipment – Unknown

Resistances – Unknown

Holy shit, was the only thought that crashed through Jason's skull. He could feel a sinking sensation in his stomach – not just at the loss of the barricade, but at what this creature represented. Someone new had just entered the fray.

Jason and Riley were already dashing toward the western roadway before the dust and debris had fully settled. They needed to keep the Abomination busy – the monster having thrown their defensive line into disarray. The only advantage was that the creature had destroyed an entire wave of feral undead by itself and seemed content to stomp any of the ghouls that wandered too close.

Jason did a double take as he realized that the monster was making no move to attack the Kin. Strangely, it simply stood in the entrance to the western roadway as their soldiers began to regroup. *What the hell is going on?* he wondered to himself.

He didn't have to wait long for an answer. Even as Jason and Riley reached the western barricade, two figures stepped calmly through what remained of the wooden fortification. Their faces came into focus a moment later as the debris began to settle.

"Morgan?" Jason muttered in confusion. Their fellow Shadow Council member had finally made her appearance as she strode into the courtyard, her wooden staff thumping against the ground and a familiar smirk curling her lips. Beside her stood none other than Thorn himself, the man's lips pinched into a grim line and his lone eye trained on Jason's bone-clad form.

"Hello, boy," Morgan said, unperturbed by the chaos that filled the market. "Fancy seeing you here."

Chapter 59 - Devastated

“What, no witty response or inspiring monologue?” Morgan demanded, a single eyebrow arched as she watched Jason’s and Riley’s stunned reactions. “I was at least expecting a simple hello. You’re nearly as entertaining as my mute friend here,” she added, gesturing to Thorn where he stood impassively beside her, his lone eye never leaving Jason.

“What... what are you doing?” Jason finally asked.

Although, the answer to that question was staring him in the face – his mind already racing as it cobbled together the remaining pieces of the puzzle. It was clear now that Thorn had been behind the manipulation of the native undead. They had the “who,” but they had still been missing the “how.” Morgan filled in that hole perfectly. She would have been more than capable of creating the dark-magic crystals that Frank had found embedded in the Wraithling nest and the gem that Thorn had first crushed in his hand outside the walls of the Twilight Throne.

“You have been helping him this entire time,” Jason murmured, an ember of anger erupting to life in his chest. That made Morgan responsible for the deaths of countless villagers in the outlying towns and the Kin that had accompanied Frank and Vera. She was also responsible for the attacks on the city – on his people.

She had betrayed them.

“Of course,” Morgan answered glibly. “What did you expect? That I had spent my entire life learning the dark arts, hiding and training in secret – despised by the rest of the humans – only to have some *child* claim the Dark One’s mantle?

“Did you think I wanted to be a lowly grave keeper when you found me? That I enjoyed living in that single-room shack with a handful of books? No. I’ve always dreamed of more – yearned for more, just as you did. Except the difference is that I spent years training my gifts, devoting my life to the Dark One.”

Morgan slammed her staff into the ground with surprising force, her eyes glowing darkly as she summoned her mana. “It should have been me,” she spat with surprising venom. “Instead, you treat me as some glorified librarian? I should have been the one to conquer Lux and lead this city. Someone capable of making the hard decisions. Someone that understands that people are expendable – a means to an end,” she said, gesturing at the Abomination that still loomed beside the pair, its body a mishmash of decayed flesh stitched together at

haphazard angles.

“Oh, oh my god,” Riley murmured. “Those were the injured Kin...”

Jason’s eyes widened as he stared at the Abomination, yet another piece clicking into place. He could recall Morgan’s words even now. She had managed to “salvage” the situation with the injured Kin – meaning that she had repurposed their bodies into this... this *thing*. The flames of Jason’s anger burned even hotter as this realization struck him, threatening to break free.

“Yes, my dear stupid girl,” Morgan replied, rolling her eyes. “They have been given a chance to serve a better purpose and so they shall.”

“Enough of this rambling,” Thorn interjected finally, his arms crossed. His lone eye skimmed across the courtyard to the southern and eastern barricades, where the native undead still threatened to overcome the Kin. “We did not come here to talk. We came to finish what we started: the annihilation of the Keeper and this corrupted city. What you choose to do with the remains is of little concern to me.”

Morgan glared at Thorn. “Don’t think to order me around, sycophant. You wouldn’t be here if not for my help.”

Jason saw a possible opening to foster dissent among the pair, and he forcibly shoved down his anger – no matter how badly he wanted to repay Morgan for her betrayal. “Do you think he will let you go once this is over?” Jason asked. “His Order is hellbent on destroying any magic in this world. If I am removed as the Dark One’s avatar, that will just leave a vacancy that needs to be filled. Once we’re gone, you are next.”

Morgan laughed in response, turning her attention back to Jason. “I will take my chances. I am not some novice – some babe in the graveyard who stumbled upon my powers. No, boy. I have been training for *decades*. Speaking of which, perhaps our prickly friend is right. Perhaps it is time for me to show you what a real Necromancer can do.”

As Morgan finished speaking, she shrugged off the heavy cloak that hung from her shoulders. Underneath, she wore a plain tunic and trousers – not dissimilar to what she had been wearing when Jason first met her in the graveyard outside of Lux. Except now, an extra pair of arms adorned her torso. She had cut ragged holes in her tunic to accommodate the new limbs. Fresh wounds, only partially healed, revealed where they had been stitched to Morgan’s torso. Before Jason could react, her two sets of hands began moving, casting multiple spells as arcane words tumbled from her lips in a torrent.

Dark orbs of energy formed in the air in front of Morgan,

condensing almost instantly into beams of obsidian energy that rocketed toward Jason and Riley. Just as the rays neared them, a hulking form dashed in front of the pair, the creature absorbing the blasts and blocking Morgan and Thorn from view. Jason soon recognized the brute as Grunt, throbbing green veins riddling the bulging muscles of his arms and legs. He seemed unshaken by the attack, only slight burns marring his torso.

“Now, now, what is all of this turmoil over here? Can’t you people see we’re busy?” Jerry said to Jason and Riley, appearing next to Grunt and casually leaning against his bodyguard. Then he seemed to notice Morgan and Thorn for the first time, his eyes widening theatrically. “Oh, Morgan, I almost didn’t notice you there. You’re looking well. And it’s lucky that you’re here. I had just been thinking we could use an extra hand or two...”

“This isn’t your fight, thief,” Morgan sneered, ignoring his poor attempt at humor. “I suggest you go back to whatever hole you crawled out of before you get hurt.”

“Alas, I cannot,” Jerry replied, raising his hands in a futile gesture. “See, Grunt here feels threatened by your little friend,” he said, pointing at the Abomination. “He’s the competitive sort, and there’s only room for one mute giant in this city.” He cupped a hand at his mouth and added conspiratorially, “I think it may be a size thing.” This earned him an irritated scowl from Morgan.

Jerry turned his head slightly as he finished speaking, covering his whisper with a cough as he addressed Riley and Jason. “Grunt and I will handle Morgan. You two take Thorn. I ordered the rest of our troops back to the other barricades.” Jason nodded ever-so-slightly in response, belatedly noting that the Kin that had been manning the western line had retreated during their exchange with Morgan.

“I’m done with this talking,” Thorn interjected. “It’s time we finish this.” His eyes leveled on Jason. “Let’s see if you have used the time that I gave you wisely.”

Thorn disappeared in a flash of movement, reappearing only seconds later in front of Jason. He barely raised his staff in time to block Thorn’s strike, knocking his arm aside. And then the pair became a flurry of movement – Jason pressed on the defensive as Thorn attacked relentlessly, his arms and fists moving so quickly that they blurred as he struck. Jason’s attention honed to a fine point as he blocked and dodged, barely able to fend off each of the man’s attacks. Jason noticed movement in his peripheral vision as the others engaged, but had difficulty focusing on it with Thorn pressing his attack.

Grunt rocketed across the courtyard toward the Abomination, each step causing the cobblestones to crack and crumble underfoot.

The two monsters clashed with tremendous force, every blow causing ripples of kinetic energy to explode out in a concentric ring as they slammed their meaty fists into one another. The force was enough to knock aside and pulverize any of the ghouls that were unfortunate enough to wander through the ruined barricade. There was no finesse or strategy to their attacks – the battle reduced to a simple brawl as they beat at one another with single-minded fury.

At the same time, Jerry had moved to assist his bodyguard and friend by engaging Morgan. The thief was a shadow as he bounced around at a blazing speed, his daggers held at the ready. A thin crimson aura once more coated his lithe body. Morgan wasted no time in retaliating. Her four hands wound through a constant stream of gestures, and beams of dark energy lanced through the air over and over again as the mage tried to blast the nimble rogue. Jerry deftly avoided the beams as the energy splashed against the ground and nearby buildings – the malignant mana eating through the material like acid.

Thorn smashed a hand into Jason's side, causing the bones of his armor to crunch. Then the nimble man's leg swept up to slam into his chest. A blast of dark energy suddenly erupted in front of Jason. Thorn backflipped out of the way just in time, giving Jason a momentary reprieve as he cradled his aching side. He coughed harshly, the coppery taste of blood on his lips. Even through his new armor, the single strike felt like it had fractured a rib. He couldn't imagine what sort of damage the blow would have done if he had been unprotected.

And then Riley was beside him, slinging her bow over her shoulder as she drew the daggers at her waist. Her eyes shone with dark energy, blood-red circles now resting where her pupils should have been. The pair shared a single, wordless look before facing off against Thorn. This was just another enemy. Just another challenge. And they now had plenty of practice facing off against a stronger opponent.

"You've gotten better," Thorn remarked, a small smile tugging at his otherwise placid expression. "But not nearly good enough."

As soon as he finished speaking, he vanished again.

Damn it, he's fast, Jason thought. He could barely follow the man's movements, even with his enhanced *Dodge* and *Perception* skills.

A blow crashed into Jason's back as Thorn reappeared behind him, the force of the strike sending him to his knees. He felt his new armor splinter under the attack, and the crystals embedded in Thorn's palm ignited, draining the dark mana from one of the minions that clung to his back. In a flash, its legs uncurled, and it dropped to the ground, creating a chink in Jason's new armor. Almost instantly, the

minion disappeared from the menu in his peripheral vision.

Before Thorn could capitalize on his attack, Riley was on him, her blades flashing as she engaged. The one-eyed man ducked her first blow, palming aside her other arm as she whipped it around, trying to slice at his abdomen. Then he slammed his hand into her chest, a flash of dark mana erupting from his palm that sent Riley flying. Her health dipped precariously from the single strike.

Jason used the brief respite to regain his feet. He turned back to Thorn and swept forward with his staff. He struck repeatedly, trying to keep the man on the defensive while Riley recovered. He was just a hair too slow. His single-eyed enemy seemed to anticipate every blow and avoided his strikes with pinpoint precision before retaliating with a carefully measured punch or kick – each attack damaging or destroying one of Jason minions. If not for his new armor, he expected his body would already be riddled with broken bones and battered flesh. However, he wouldn't have the extra protection for much longer at this rate.

Riley was suddenly back at Jason's side, having chugged a health potion. The two squared off with Thorn and pressed the assault at the same time. Riley moved to flank their opponent and keep him on the defensive while Jason struck from the front. They were a whirlwind of strikes, blows, and parries – their weapons darting through the air in a blur of motion.

Then they finally caught him.

Riley was positioned behind Thorn to keep pressure on him, forcing the man to keep shifting to the side to maintain line of sight on her position. Her dagger swept forward, causing Thorn to duck and begin to sidestep to counter. Yet her other blade brought him up short, and Thorn was forced to bat aside her wrist. His back was now fully facing Jason. Jason knew this was his opening and he didn't hesitate. He struck with his staff, whipping the weapon forward with all the strength he could muster.

Thorn's head tilted as though in slow motion, the man just barely catching sight of Jason's attack. He shifted his weight slightly to avoid the blow – giving himself only a scant few inches of space. But Jason had a surprise in store for Thorn. He summoned a *Soul Slash*. The dark blade of energy arced away from the tip of the staff, giving him unexpected reach.

Jason's saw Thorn's eye widen in surprise as he noticed the malignant black blade. Acting in desperation, Thorn dropped to the ground, trying to avoid the attack. He was just barely too slow, the tip of Jason's scythe ripping through his cloak and tearing through the bandages that wound around his torso while Riley's daggers tore into his flesh. Then he hit the ground and disappeared.

In a flash, Thorn reappeared a few yards away, and Jason and Riley turned to face him. He shrugged off his tattered cloak and Jason could see that the bandages wound around his entire body, gray bands crisscrossing in a chaotic pattern. Droplets of blood sprinkled the ground, evidence that Jason and Riley had hit him – yet the damage seemed minimal, his back straight and his face unfazed. He must have avoided the brunt of Jason’s attack.

Jason didn’t know how he expected Thorn to react to the blow. This was the first time they had actually injured him in a meaningful way. What he didn’t expect was to see the broad grin that lingered on the man’s grizzled face. Thorn lifted his eye to look at Jason, and he saw a hint of madness there. “Finally. You are a real Keeper now.”

Thorn flexed his shoulders, his blood quickly staining the ruined bandages along his back and side. “All of the training I have endured – the hardships – they have led to this moment. I can finally take off the shackles that bind me.”

Before Jason and Riley could question what the hell Thorn was talking about, he tore at his bandages, the stained cloth dropping away. Underneath was skin that was marred by an endless series of scars, not a single patch of unblemished skin visible on his neck and torso. It looked like Thorn had been through a blender, his skin shredded, regrown, and then shredded again. The result was flesh that had toughened into a rough leather. It was a wonder he could even move.

Thorn raised his lone eye to meet Jason’s gaze, a manic gleam sparkling in his iris. Without warning, he ripped off the cloth covering his other eye. What they discovered underneath wasn’t human. A glowing yellow gem rested in the ruined socket, scars radiating out from the crystal like the points of a star. The gem glimmered as it rotated to focus on Jason and Riley.

“What the hell is that?” Riley murmured.

“A gift from the Order,” Thorn replied, the same mad grin still painted on his face. “A relic, stolen from the air mages in a time long past.”

“If we cut you once, we can do it again,” Jason growled. “That gem won’t help you.”

“Ahh, there you are wrong,” Thorn murmured. “With this eye, I can see your future. You die here today – both of you.”

Then Thorn was moving again. He launched himself forward at an incredible pace, his body a shadowy blur as he charged the pair. Jason and Riley immediately retaliated, yet their weapons struck only air as Thorn nimbly dodged around them. If he had seemed fast before, he was on an entirely different level now. They simply couldn’t touch him.

Thorn stepped forward, twisting his body and curving around Jason's last attack only to come up inside his guard. Riley lunged at Thorn from behind, but even with his back to her, he seemed to be able to anticipate her strike. He merely stepped aside before slamming his fist into Jason's chest. Thorn released the dark mana he had stolen from his minions in a blast of energy that sent Jason flying backward, his back crashing into the boards of a nearby building and splintering the wood.

The world spun as Jason vainly tried to catch his bearings. Red notifications flashed in his peripheral vision, indicating that the single blow had blasted through half his remaining health – the occasional glancing blow and *Soul Slash* had already left him weakened. If not for his new armor, he expected that strike would have slain him. As it was, he had already lost eight of his new drones, their ivory bodies crumbling and falling away.

Thorn's reflexes are beyond insane, he thought. He couldn't understand what had happened. The man had been fast before, but he almost seemed to be able to see their attacks coming now – even without having eyes on his opponent. That couldn't have been his hearing. A chaotic battle still raged in the courtyard as the Kin tried to fend off the ghouls, drowning out the sounds of their fight.

Jason looked up to find Riley taking on Thorn by herself, the archer's body covered in a crimson glow that eerily reminded him of Jerry. Riley lunged, her dagger stabbing at Thorn's stomach. He neatly caught her hand and pulled, tugging her off her feet before he pivoted and used his momentum to launch her into the air. Riley slammed against the ground with bone-shattering force, the cobblestones cracking under the impact. Jason saw her health plummet and Thorn's hand rise into the air to finish her.

He felt rage blossom in his chest, and a roar at his lips. Before he knew it, Jason was already charging toward them, his feet pounding the ground. In an instant, he was there, sweeping forward with his staff as he channeled a *Soul Slash*. Thorn leaped back to avoid the blow, and Jason crouched protectively overtop Riley. He just needed to give her a chance to chug a health potion and re-enter the fight.

He glanced down at Riley, still keeping his attention focused on Thorn, although the man seemed content to give them some space, a sneer curling his lips. Riley looked like hell. Blood stained her teeth, and cuts and tears marred her armor. They had both taken a beating, barely managing to keep up with Thorn. For all of their training, for all of the hours spent in the challenges, this was the best they could manage? They were still losing.

Thorn stood there, the same mad gleam in his eye. "Is this it? Is

this all you've got?" he demanded. Jason could only grit his teeth in response, glaring back into the yellow gemstone that twinkled in Thorn's ruined eye socket.

What is he waiting for? Jason wondered. The only explanation was that Thorn wanted Riley to heal herself so that he could keep fighting. But why? This didn't seem to be about vanquishing the old gods anymore. Something else was driving Thorn.

"Jason," he heard Riley murmur below him.

"You need to heal," he replied. Snatching a potion from his bag, he tried to hand it to her. "Quickly, drink this."

"No." She grabbed his wrist. "It won't be enough. Too powerful... One way left..."

"What are you talking about?" Jason demanded.

"I'm sorry. I-I didn't tell you everything... about the last challenge," Riley said, each word costing her and coming out in a pained gasp.

"What do you mean?" Jason asked, confused. She had already told him about the passive buff she had received. He had no idea what she was talking about.

"The challenge... it gave me another ability. You can win this... with my sacrifice."

"What? No! We're stronger together," Jason said, trying to pull away, but her hand was like iron on his wrist. "This is what we've trained for." Even as he said the words, he wasn't certain that he believed them. Thorn had already bested them easily.

"It's the only way," Riley said, looking at him with determination shining in her eyes. "Just... kill him for me. Make him pay for what he's done."

As Riley trailed off, her health finally hit zero, and her chest stopped moving. Jason just stared down at her, the hot, burning rage in his chest suddenly turning cold at the sight of Riley's corpse – her face covered in her own blood. Thorn had killed her. Had killed his people and threatened to destroy everything that Jason had created and built. He couldn't handle it anymore. Jason raised his eyes to meet Thorn's.

I'm going to fucking kill him...

Before he could move or react, Riley's body exploded, vines erupting from her chest in a shower of blood. The tendrils stretched into the sky all around Jason, curling and coiling. He glanced at the vines in shock, noting belatedly that Thorn was sprinting toward him, a look of concern finally marring his expression. He was instantly met by a wall of thorned vines that lashed out at the agent, sending Thorn flying backward.

The cage of thorns tightened on Jason, obscuring the courtyard

from sight. He could feel the tendrils wrapping around his armor before wriggling into the cracks between the bone plates, and he squirmed as he tried to struggle out of the death grip the plant had on him. Large thorns riddled the vines and soon punctured his skin, each prick a burning star of pain. Struggling only dug the spines further into his flesh. At the same time, he could feel some sort of energy enter his body like molten lava, flooding his veins and mixing with his frigid mana.

What is this?

The vines tightened again, more thorns stabbing into his flesh until it felt like his entire body was being simultaneously frozen and burned, the sensation alternating so rapidly that he struggled to stay conscious. As the power swept through him, he began to lose control, his vision swimming before going completely dark. It was difficult to think clearly. He was surrounded only by darkness and pain.

Riley's face appeared out of the darkness, unblemished and unharmed. The contrast was painful after witnessing her death. She stared back at him, a smile on her face – the same one he had seen during their date at Cerillion Entertainment. It was filled with a sense of nervous excitement and a sparkle of mischief. This was the girl he knew. The warrior. The friend. The beauty that had filled his thoughts and dreams for years.

“You can do this,” she murmured.

And then, in a flash, the image was gone, and the power began to recede. Jason blinked rapidly, his vision clearing slowly. He found himself standing in the courtyard once again. A cage of vines encircled him, and Riley's body was gone. Blood-red roses had bloomed along the vines, their petals drifting open even as he watched.

At the same time, a notification crashed into his vision.

System Notice

The player Riley has used a hidden spell, *Guardian's Sacrifice*. She has willingly given up her life to protect and empower her Keeper, transferring power to her ward. The nature of the corresponding buff and its activation conditions are unique to the Soul Guard's class and abilities.

You have been granted the buff, “Fire and Fury” – allowing you to channel the incarnation of vengeance for a limited time. For two minutes, you will be granted a 300% increase to damage, a 300% bonus to your base statistics, and a 300% increase to your total health pool.

Destroy the heretic! Take his life and crush his soul. Send a message to any others foolish enough to attack us. No one shall challenge the darkness and live. – The Dark One

Jason skimmed the prompt quickly, an endless barrage of questions filtering through his mind, but he didn't have time to consider them. The vines peeled away and curled back into the ground, soon vanishing from sight, and leaving him standing in the courtyard with Thorn watching him from only a few dozen feet away.

Energy raced through Jason's veins in a torrent. The sensation was tantalizing. It felt like he could do anything. Scale a mountain. Fight a dragon with his bare hands. Crush, rage, and destroy anything in his path. Dark mana peeled away from his body in tendrils so thick that they were almost tangible, and the energy lashed at the air in time with his heartbeat. Rope-like bands of darkness sprung from his back, curling into the air to form phantom, bat-like wings of obsidian energy.

The darkness called to him – whispered to him – asking him what he wanted. What did he desire most? He knew he only need ask, and the power would grant his wish.

Jason raised his eyes, forcing himself to focus on Thorn. As Jason caught sight of his enemy, his rage reignited and the desire for vengeance filled his mind. The sensation felt almost unnatural – like some outside force was fueling it. He could feel his focus honing to a fine point, the world bleeding away and leaving only him and Thorn. This man had killed Riley. He threatened to destroy everything that they had built.

Jason knew what he wanted.

He wanted to make Thorn suffer.

He wanted to kill him.

Chapter 60 - Treacherous

“What...” Thorn began, his lone eye widening in surprise as he observed Jason’s transformation. His body now glowed darkly, onyx wings of energy cascading from his back. For the first time, Thorn looked nervous.

Jason appeared beside him, spinning his staff so fast that it was almost invisible. Thorn just barely intercepted the attack with his forearm, and he grunted under the force of the blow. His legs buckled as he struggled to stay upright. However, the strike still wasn’t strong enough to break the man’s reinforced limbs. Jason had been testing his newfound strength; needless to say, they were on a more even footing now.

Thorn retaliated and shoved Jason away in a frightening display of strength. Within seconds, Jason was back, his staff darting through the air, and the occasional dark blade of energy flashed into existence as he summoned a *Soul Slash*. The pair danced across the cobblestones, unable to spare attention to anything else as they traded an explosive flurry of blows. A last-minute dodge by Thorn sent Jason’s next strike wide, his staff clipping the side of a building and the single blow slicing through a support column. The building began to cave in with a frightening rumble, but the pair ignored the debris. Thorn’s fist rushed forward only to be intercepted by Jason’s staff. The force of the strike tossed Jason backward several yards where he landed in a crouch before launching himself forward once more.

The occasional ghoul would stray too close to the pair, managing to slide around Grunt and the Abomination where they fought in the middle of the ruined western barricade. Any feral creature stupid enough to come close was pulverized under the force of Jason’s and Thorn’s attacks. The two didn’t spare the creatures a second glance as they raced through the courtyard, a concussive blast of sound vibrating the air each time they traded blows.

As the fight wore on, Jason still couldn’t land a clean hit on Thorn. He could feel rage curl and coil in his chest, writhing in frustration. He wanted to tear out this man’s heart and feed it to him. He wanted to cut, rend, and destroy – the dark mana in his veins an unrelenting icy torrent. However, no matter how fast Jason moved, Thorn was always one step ahead. The realization that they had reached an impasse – that he still wasn’t strong enough – just fanned the flames of his anger.

I can’t beat him. This nagging thought kept repeating itself in

Jason's mind no matter how forcefully he tried to push it away. *He's too strong.*

Thorn's fist darted forward, and Jason moved to block the blow. However, instead of following through, Thorn used his momentum to spin into a kick. Jason barely managed to shift his weight in time, taking the blow on his shoulder instead of directly to the head. Even so, he felt the bone armor crumble under the force of the attack. He let out a hissing breath as dull pain radiated from his shoulder and he backpedaled quickly to create some space. A red notification flashed in his peripheral vision, indicating that the underlying bone and muscle were damaged and his movements had been slowed. With his enhanced stats, his *Willpower* was sitting at close to 3,600, dramatically increasing his mana regen. He knew his body would knit itself back together quickly, but it would still cost him several precious seconds.

Seconds he didn't have.

"For a moment there, you had me worried," Thorn sneered as Jason backed away, his yellow eye gleaming and flickering with an unnatural light. He barely looked injured, and he stood with his back straight, as though they had just engaged in some light sparring. "And here I thought you would finally put up a challenge, especially with the girl's dramatic sacrifice. But even now, you are still no match for me."

Jason didn't respond. Some part of him knew that Thorn was telling the truth – he had barely hurt the man even with the buff that Riley had given him. Even as this thought drifted through his mind, he could feel frustration well in his chest, and he wanted nothing more than to charge Thorn – to make him pay.

Yet he held himself back – if only barely.

Normally, the magically fueled rage helped bolster him and push him forward, allowing Jason to take risks that he would typically avoid. Right now, however, he knew that the anger was just a distraction, a weakness that Thorn was manipulating to his advantage. Suddenly, a wispy black image of Rex's face formed in his mind's eye. He needed to fight smart. What would his teacher do?

The answer came to him a moment later, and he could have sworn he heard Rex whispering it in his ear – although, he suspected this was a product of his adrenaline and mana-addled mind.

"*Fight smart,*" Rex urged.

His teacher wouldn't keep smashing his head against a brick wall and hope for the best. He would focus on finding his opponent's *weakness*. Jason struggled to tamp down on the power that raged through his body, although it took far more effort than he cared to admit. The rage and frustration and anger were tantalizing – emotions

accumulated over the weeks of hardship he had endured. Before, those feelings had driven him forward and given him strength. But they had just been a crutch. They wouldn't help him now. He needed to be stronger than that.

He raised his eyes to meet Thorn's, his *Perception* triggering. Ghostly blue light illuminated various parts of the one-eyed man's body. He noted the way Thorn's chest was moving more rapidly – indicating that he was out of breath, although he was hiding it well. And while Jason's blows might not have fractured Thorn's limbs, he could still see the purple bruising across his leathery, scarred skin and his natural regen wasn't keeping pace. Despite Thorn's nonchalance, blocking Jason's strikes was costing him now.

He's not invincible. Jason focused on that thought, using it to center and calm himself. He just needed to be smart here. He needed to be focused. The man had to have a weakness.

"What? No response?" Thorn said as Jason stared at him. "Then I suppose it's time to end this." With an angry snarl, Thorn darted forward.

Jason was moving more slowly now with his injured arm, but he did his best to avoid the flurry of attacks. The occasional strike made it through his defense, and even a glancing blow chipped away at his health and sent him reeling.

He was recovering quickly, though, and his arm was beginning to heal. As the debuff finally disappeared, Jason fought back. Thorn smoothly intercepted and batted aside each swing of his staff. Except that this time, Jason was paying attention, refusing to give himself over to blind rage. His eyes widened imperceptibly as he observed the exchange. With his heightened stats and senses, he could finally see Thorn's movements – his limbs no longer merely a blur of motion. Something felt off, though. No matter how quickly Jason moved, Thorn was always one step ahead of him.

It took another round of blows for Jason to finally see it. When he did, the realization struck him like a truck. Thorn was moving *before* Jason swung – as though he could see a blow coming before Jason had even committed to the attack. Once he caught the pattern, he could see it even more clearly. Thorn was like water, bending around each sweep and stab of Jason's staff, each step carefully planned before Jason struck. This was how he was avoiding Jason's strikes. This wasn't superhuman reflexes. Something more was at work here.

The eye. It must be his eye, Jason thought, his gaze training on the glowing yellow gem embedded in Thorn's ruined socket. He recalled the man's comment about being able to see Jason's future. He had discarded that as a meaningless threat, but what if the man had

been telling the truth? That seemed to be the only answer for how Thorn was able to anticipate Jason's attacks.

If he was right, then that was a terrifying ability. How far ahead could Thorn see? How did Jason counter an opponent that could anticipate his attacks long before he struck? He had been looking for a weakness, only to discover that his opponent had been concealing an incredible ability. A sense of hopelessness suddenly settled on Jason's shoulders.

How did he fight an opponent that could glimpse the future?

* * *

Grunt and the Abomination were still engaged in an all-out brawl in the middle of the ruined western barricade. The zombie monster tackled him, the two hulking creatures smashing into the ground and causing the earth to tremble under the impact.

The Abomination opened its ruined maw, revealing rows of rotten, jagged teeth, before closing his jaw around Grunt's shoulder. Glowing green blood streamed from the wound and Grunt let out a pained roar. He gripped one of the Abomination's arms that clung to his body, ripping and tearing at the limb. As he kicked off the Abomination with his feet, the muscles in his legs bulged powerfully. With a sickening crunch, the arm came free from its socket, ripping open the stitches that bound it to the Abomination. As the limb tore, the monster's body flew off of Grunt, slamming into a nearby building. A shower of debris filled the air as the structure began to crumble, obscuring their vision.

Breathing heavily, Grunt struggled back to his feet. His body was covered in his own green blood, and he still clutched the Abomination's arm in one hand. Even with the limb no longer attached to the creature, the fingers jerked and spasmed. Grunt gave the limb a disgusted look before he squared off with the ruined building – waiting patiently.

The Abomination came hurtling through the cloud of dirt and dust, its limbs flailing at the air and its maw gaping widely. Without hesitation, Grunt rushed to meet it, using its ruined arm like a club. He beat the Abomination aside, the blow fracturing the monster's decayed flesh and sending the beast flying into yet another building.

Within only seconds, the Abomination was back on its feet. Despite the gashes in its decayed flesh and its missing limbs, the monster just kept coming – the injuries barely slowing its movements. Yet Grunt's gaze was still defiant as he faced off against the

Abomination – the unholy creature shuffling out of the ruined remains of the building.

Then the two charged each other once again, their feet pounding the earth of the courtyard.

* * *

“You want to bet on the outcome? My money is on Grunt,” Jerry quipped, appearing several yards behind Morgan and gesturing at the pair of giants lazily. He spared little attention to the mage’s two sets of hands as they wound through a complicated series of gestures. Dense orbs of dark mana were forming in front of Morgan, rotating in the air around her.

One of the orbs abruptly condensed and a beam of dark energy immediately rocketed toward Jerry, only to splash harmlessly across the area where the thief had stood a moment before. The unholy energy ate into the cobblestones at an alarming rate, hungrily tearing through the stone with ease.

“What do you say? 10 gold on the outcome?” Jerry asked, appearing a few yards away, this time leaning against the ruined remains of a wagon. He seemed unperturbed by his close brush with death.

“Stand still,” Morgan hissed through gritted teeth, already firing off another barrage of dark energy at Jerry.

“Spoiled sport. You really need to learn to relax; life is too short to be so serious all the time. You are likely to make yourself ill,” the thief remarked, a frown creasing his lips before he disappeared again in a flash of movement.

This time, Jerry retaliated. Three throwing knives raced through the air behind the mage, even as Jerry reappeared in front of her. One set of the mage’s hands shifted into a new pattern without skipping a beat. A nova of dark energy erupted from her body in a ring. The corrupt energy forced Jerry to retreat and destroyed the throwing knives that hurtled toward Morgan’s position. The metal rusted away until only a cloud of fine powder lingered in the air around the dark mage.

“Besides. If I just let you hit me, that would take all of the fun out of it, wouldn’t you say?” Jerry asked, a lopsided grin on his face as he now sat on the roof of one of the nearby buildings. A thin crimson aura coated his body, and he seemed relaxed, kicking his feet playfully.

“Although I have to say, your aim seems to be getting better. A

few more minutes of practice and you might even be able to hit me!” Jerry added, gesturing to the errant droplet of mana that had eaten a hole in his leather armor. This just earned him an angry grunt from Morgan as she continued to whisper arcane words and launch spells at him. The dark mana crashed against the side of the building, carving a hole in the structure. As the debris began to settle, it was clear that she had missed – again.

“You know, something about this whole encounter has been bothering me,” the thief remarked as he darted around Morgan, appearing and reappearing as she tried to track his movements, dark mana spraying the ground and nearby buildings. The thief made little effort to fight back, simply dancing around the mage and nimbly avoiding her attacks.

“If you came up with this dastardly plan of yours to work with Thorn, why just march through the western barricade? I mean, I understand the *idea* of making a grand entrance – don’t get me wrong. I’m certainly a fan of a little theatrics, and it was suitably impressive. Really, it gave me chills.”

Morgan blasted the area where he had been standing, but the thief was already gone. She ground her teeth together in frustration.

“But it does seem rather.... well, *stupid* I suppose is the right word. Especially for someone of your esteemed intellect,” Jerry continued. At this comment, Morgan huffed angrily and released another wave of dark energy, blowing a massive hole in a nearby building. Yet Jerry just reappeared behind her a moment later, completely unharmed.

“None of us were aware that you were working with Thorn. If you had come to the courtyard ahead of the ghouls, you might have taken out at least one of us. You might have even slain our Dark Lord and Savior himself!” He stepped around Morgan, avoiding a series of blasts effortlessly as he tapped his lips in thought.

“Thorn wanted a chance to face the boy,” Morgan grunted in between spells, keeping up her barrage.

“See, I thought of that!” Jerry said. “He seems rather infatuated with our unholy protégé. Maybe just a bit too interested, if you catch my drift. However, that doesn’t change the fact that you could just as easily have taken out or incapacitated Riley or my illustrious self. Or you could have wiped out the defenders at one of the barricades.”

Jerry waved a hand at the remains of the nearby fortification where Grunt and the Abomination grappled. “As it stands, you actually harmed very few of the Kin protecting the western line. Also, Grunt and your ugly friend seem to be positioned rather favorably for our defenders. Or, at least, it seems rather serendipitous that they are blocking the western barricade.”

“What are you trying to say?” Morgan grunted in between spells.

“Well... I’m not exactly sure,” Jerry answered, now standing in front of her again and looking somewhat confused. “It could be that age and resentment has addled your mind. Although, that doesn’t seem quite right. You actually seem rather spry for your age,” he remarked, gesturing at her hands where they wound through another intricate series of gestures. “I imagine it requires a fair bit of focus to keep that up with two sets of hands.

“Perhaps the answer is more personal.” His eyes widened in mock surprise. “Is this a Stockholm syndrome sort of situation – you fell in love with old cyclops over there after he kidnapped you? Oh my, you poor dear! Show me on the Abomination where the bad man touched you,” he added with mock seriousness.

Morgan fumed silently, unable to muster a retort as arcane words spilled from her lips. Instead, another barrage of dark mana raced through the air, but Jerry simply sidestepped the bolts in a single, fluid movement. Then he abruptly vanished in a blur of motion. This time, he didn’t immediately reappear, and Morgan’s eyes darted around, searching for the rogue. She froze as she felt a cold blade press against the side of her neck and Jerry’s mustache tickled her ear.

“Although, there is another possible answer,” the thief whispered playfully. “Perhaps this is all a ruse. I notice how you have been watching the fight between the boy and our thorny friend. Perhaps you are simply biding your time.”

A blast of energy erupted from Morgan’s body, interrupting Jerry. However, the thief was already gone, his blade having retreated with him. His message, however, had been clear. He had been toying with her. Without her Abomination to cover her in melee, Morgan was more vulnerable – there was a limit to how well her dark magic could protect her. The corrupt energy was good at destroying things, but it was only passable in terms of defensive spells.

Jerry reappeared a moment later, flipping a dagger end over end with a lazy twitch of his wrist. “Anyway, this is just pure speculation on my part,” he added glibly. “I could be wildly off base, I suppose.”

Morgan’s hands hesitated for a fraction of a second, her eyes darting to the interior courtyard, where Jason and Thorn clashed in a frantic blur of motion, each blow causing the air to ripple with kinetic energy. Jason was slowly losing. That was abundantly clear to both of them. Their Regent’s ivory armor was now a figment of its former glory, and obsidian blood stained his pale skin. At the same time, Morgan’s gaze fixed on the yellow gem embedded in the ruined socket

of Thorn's eye, the telltale glow still visible even at this distance. Morgan's furtive glance wasn't missed by the undead innkeeper and the smile that lingered on his face widened.

"Or perhaps I'm not too far off the mark," he said before gesturing at the ruined courtyard around them, the area pockmarked with small craters. "So, shall we continue our lovely little dance, my lady?" Jerry asked with a short bow and offering an arm as though asking to twirl her around a ballroom. The gesture looked more than a little out of place amid the craters and corpses that littered the courtyard.

Morgan turned her attention back to Jerry, grimacing at the mocking grin on the thief's face. She held her tongue as her hands wound through the gestures of another spell. However, her fingers moved slightly slower this time, and her aim was even further off as the next set of beams struck – almost as though she wasn't trying to hit him.

Jerry vanished again as dark mana washed across the spot where he had been standing only a moment before. Overtop the clash of steel and the sounds of battle that practically vibrated the air of the market, an observant person might have detected a faint laugh echoing through the courtyard.

* * *

Thorn's fist slammed into Jason, dark energy pouring out of the crystals embedded in his palm. The mana crashed over Jason in a wave of excruciating pain, tearing at his flesh as he was sent hurtling through the air. He landed with a heavy thump. His body created a small crater as it hit the ground, and more fragments of bone crumbled away.

Jason groaned as he lifted himself back to his feet. His left arm wasn't responding any longer. It took him a second to realize that his armor had been completely destroyed and that his shoulder had popped out of the socket. Gritting his teeth, he shoved the bone back into place. Even with the dampened pain feedback, it felt like his shoulder was infested with fire ants. The minions overlaying his armor were almost entirely destroyed, and he had nearly run out of materials to recast his regular *Bone Armor*. A glance at his Summon Information revealed that he only had three minions left, and they primarily covered his legs.

Thorn made no effort to capitalize on Jason's momentary distraction, as though he intended to stretch out this torment. As

Jason turned back to Thorn, he saw the man's yellow eye flicker in the unnatural darkness of the market – taunting him. Jason had tried everything he could think of to overcome the gem's premonition ability. It didn't seem to be linked to Jason's intention, or at least clearing his mind of how he planned to attack hadn't helped. Planning his attacks further ahead had also proven fruitless. Thorn had still been able to anticipate each move. Although, it wasn't clear if he had just been able to see each small step in Jason's plan or if the man's natural reflexes had filled in the gaps.

That damn eye seemed unbeatable – at least when coupled with Thorn's natural fighting ability.

"Are you giving up?" Thorn asked, waiting for Jason's health to regenerate once again. "I can practically feel the sense of defeat radiating off of you in waves."

Jason wiped at his mouth with the back of his hand, black blood staining his pale skin. "Not fucking happening," he croaked.

Despite his confident words, he felt anything but. He wasn't certain how much longer he could keep this up, both physically and mentally. Only the weeks spent being brutally murdered by the undead creatures below the dark keep had allowed him to deal with Thorn's bone-shattering attacks, and it was a strain to keep up with his lightning-fast movements.

A glance to the south also confirmed that he didn't have long to resolve this fight. The native undead were barreling over the barricades and beginning to push back the Kin. Even at this distance, he could make out Eliza's telltale red fog wafting across their soldiers – likely the only reason they had managed to hold out this long. Even if he held off Thorn for a few more minutes, his troops would still be overwhelmed if he wasn't able to reinforce them soon. More and more of the feral undead were already interrupting the fight between Grunt and the nearby Abomination, the pair occasionally forced to pause their brutal brawl to smash the ivory creatures like ants.

He had no choice but to keep going.

"Let's go. What are you waiting for?" Jason challenged Thorn, squaring off again.

Thorn snorted. "I have to admire your spirit. Others would have broken already. In another time, you would have made a suitable member of the Order."

"It would be a cold day in hell before I joined you zealots," Jason croaked. "You don't care about destroying the gods. This is about you and your pride." Thorn's real eye widened, and Jason saw anger flash there.

"Ahh, it looks like I struck a sore spot," Jason added with a harsh laugh. Then he leaned forward, his dark mana bleeding from his

eyes. "You want to prove that you are the most badass motherfucker here? Then shut up and do it."

Growling in anger, Thorn dashed forward again, and Jason readied himself, raising his staff to intercept the one-eyed man's attack. As Thorn sprinted toward Jason, a stray arrow darted through the air toward him – the missile flying wide. It was an accident. A fluke shot by one of the Kin amid the chaos that permeated the courtyard.

Thorn caught sight of the missile only a fraction of a second before it struck, managing to pivot ever-so-slightly. However, the arrow tip still cut a line across Thorn's cheek, leaving a trail of blood in its wake. The injury barely slowed Thorn down as he re-engaged with Jason, his fists and feet a blur of motion.

Jason struggled to keep up with the flurry of attacks, pivoting to keep his injured shoulder out of reach. However, his thoughts were focused on something else. He couldn't stop thinking about the arrow. Thorn hadn't seen that attack coming. What did that mean? That the power of his eye was limited to a certain distance? Or perhaps it only triggered when the attack was directed against Thorn? Jason wasn't certain how he could use that, assuming either of his guesses were correct.

Before he had a chance to ponder any further, Thorn appeared in front of him, striking rapidly and his good eye flickering with deadly intent. The man intended to finish this now. He wouldn't back off again. Jason did his best to counter each attack – dipping, weaving, and dodging frantically. He couldn't afford to get hit again.

Jason's staff lunged forward, and Thorn sidestepped neatly. Jason immediately pivoted into a swipe, aiming at his opponent's legs. A short jump from Thorn avoided the blow. As soon as his feet left the ground, Jason swept back with the other end of his staff, summoning a *Soul Slash*. The obsidian energy lanced through the air toward Thorn. The man twisted, narrowly avoiding the blade as he landed. Then his eye flashed triumphantly, and his fist launched forward.

Time seemed to slow as Jason saw the blow coming, aimed directly at his head. His staff was already moving to intercept the attack, but it was moving too slow. With a sense of dread, Jason abruptly realized he couldn't avoid getting hit. He could see his death hovering in front of him.

This is it, he thought, closing his eyes as he accepted his defeat. Yet the blow never landed.

Opening his eyes in surprise, it took Jason a moment to process what had happened. The world still moved in slow motion as his *Dodge* and combat skills triggered simultaneously. Dual beams of dark energy had smashed into Thorn from behind, the energy curling

around his torso and eating into his flesh. Jason could just barely make out Morgan's form behind Thorn, traces of energy still circling her hands.

In the meantime, Jerry had suddenly appeared, sliding toward Thorn's legs with his daggers raised and at the ready. Remarkably, Thorn still had the presence of mind to avoid the hit, leaping over Jerry's blow. His lips curled in a grimace of pain as the dark energy of Morgan's spells ate through his skin; the crystals embedded in his flesh struggled to absorb the mana and protect him from the corrosive power.

Which left Thorn suspended in the air.

He was open.

Jason had no idea why Jerry and Morgan had come to his aid, his mind wheeling in confusion. However, his body – trained through hours of relentless battle below the dark keep – was already beginning to move, capitalizing on his opponent's moment of weakness. Jason's staff arced through the air, the blow centered on Thorn's torso. As he moved, he summoned a *Soul Slash* and triggered his staff's ability, destroying his remaining minions to empower the attack. The skeletal armor clinging to his legs broke apart, dark mana winding up his waist and his staff before funneling into a blade of energy so thick that it was completely opaque.

The scythe of dark mana lanced through the air, on a direct collision course with Thorn. The man couldn't dodge. He couldn't avoid the attack while suspended in the air. Jason was going to cut the asshole in half. Victory was within reach.

The blow struck with incredible force, dark mana cascading out in a ring of energy that ripped up the nearby cobblestones, flinging dust and rock fragments into the air and briefly obscuring Jason's vision. A desperate, frantic hope began to well in his chest.

Had they done it? Had he slain Thorn?

As the debris began to clear, Jason could only stare in amazement.

Thorn knelt on the ground, his hands in the air. In his palms rested the blade of energy. The mana had cut into his flesh, and bright crimson blood welled along the wounds. However, the crystals in his hands were eating at the blade faster than it could cut through his skin, creating a protective anti-magic bubble around his flesh.

Thorn raised his eyes to meet his, and Jason no longer saw any sanity there. Only madness glimmered in his good eye. With a clench of his fists, Thorn shattered the blade, and the dark mana broke apart, streaming into his palms. Before Jason could react, Thorn kicked a foot forward, tripping him, and rolled on top of him, his hand clenching around Jason's throat. At the same time, Thorn spoke

harshly, his voice sounding gravelly. "Stop, or he dies."

Jason glanced to the side to see Jerry standing there, his blades drawn and ready to strike. Behind him, orbs of dark energy floated in front of Morgan, ready to launch forward. The pair both froze, Jerry's daggers hovering in the air and Morgan's fingers slowing.

"Interesting," Thorn said quietly, each breath costing him. They might not have slain the man, but they had hurt him. Even now, Jason could feel Thorn's wet blood trickle down his throat.

"I should have expected as much from you," Thorn spat, his lone eye shifting to Morgan. "Once a traitor, always a traitor, huh?"

"Fuck you, sycophant," Morgan spat, her fingers twitching.

"Language. A lady your age should show more propriety," Thorn replied with a crazed grin. "I suspected a double cross. But how did you know my eye couldn't anticipate your attack...?" He trailed off, his brow furrowing in thought. "Ahh, it was the arrow, wasn't it? You were using your farce of a battle with this insipid fool," he said, gesturing at Jerry, "to watch for a weakness." The two stood mutely, glaring at Thorn.

"Clever, but, as you can see, it wasn't nearly enough," Thorn declared. "It will be fun to test you both once I am done with the boy. I will enjoy pushing the pair of you to your limits – pressing you until you break. And then, I will crush what remains of this corrupted city."

Jason was only partly following the conversation, despair threatening to overwhelm him.

This was it. It was over. They had lost.

From his prone position, he could see the ghouls rushing across the courtyard as the remaining Kin were pushed back toward the keep. He could see his people falling. One of the feral undead leaped onto an undead soldier, ripping his body apart in a frenzy of bone and blood. Even Eliza's healing cloud couldn't save him. He could see the ruined remains of the marketplace around him. The entire area was riddled with ivory bone and pockmarked with craters, and more than one building ringing the market had entirely collapsed.

Then his gaze shifted to the keep. It wouldn't stop here. Once the ghouls had claimed the rest of the soldiers in the courtyard, they would carve their way into the keep – searching for a way to quench their insatiable hunger. They would slaughter the civilians hidden there until they reached the mana well tucked away below the fort. Then they would drain it dry. Even now, Jason could sense the well's power, and he knew the feral undead could feel the same energy calling to them.

Jason hesitated, an errant thought occurring to him as he felt Thorn's grip tighten around his throat. The man's voice sounded muted and distant as he spoke to Morgan and Jerry. Was there a limit

to how much mana Thorn could drain? With that question came an idea. It was crazy. Insane, really. But they also had nothing else to lose – not anymore.

Jason locked eyes with Jerry, the innkeeper's pale irises watching him and following his gaze toward the keep. He saw something in the thief's gaze – some sort of recognition as their eyes met. It was almost as though Jerry knew what he was thinking.

Ever-so-slowly, he saw Jerry's lips move, mouthing two words.

"Do it."

Jason closed his eyes, his fingers twitching slightly as he shifted under Thorn. The man was still focused on Jerry and Morgan – continuing his mad rant. He seemed oblivious as Jason used the small gesture to pull up the menu for the mana well below the keep. Perhaps his eye only focused on attacks or threats directed at Thorn himself. Maybe Jason had been right.

This time, Jason didn't plan to strike at Thorn – at least not directly. He shifted down the menu with another twitch of his fingers, hovering over the option for "Miracles."

"What are you doing?" Thorn suddenly demanded, turning his attention back to Jason below him. His twitching must have alerted him that Jason was up to something. "You think to escape this? To escape me? Don't you understand? You have lost. I am going to destroy everything that you have ever cared about. I will rid this world of the Dark God's corruption myself. It is inevitable."

Jason tried to reply, but he struggled to form the words with Thorn's tight grip on his throat. "What was that?" Thorn asked, mocking him as he leaned closer to Jason. "I couldn't quite make that out."

"I... I said you talk too fucking much," Jason croaked. At the same time, he tapped at the menu with one hand while grabbing hold of Thorn's arm with the other, holding him in a death grip and refusing to let him go.

It was like the floodgates had opened. Jason had channeled mana before – even in huge quantities. However, the power he felt flooding through his body was like being dropped into an ocean or surfing across the black expanse of space. It was a force of nature that defied definition and swept away his consciousness on a tsunami of pure, unadulterated power.

Jason had tapped directly into the mana-well below the keep. He hadn't asked for a portion of the power stored there. He demanded everything. He had taken not only the energy he had stockpiled over the last few weeks but all of the mana that had accumulated from the deaths of hundreds of native undead and the Kin. The well had been bursting at the seams, the liquid mana threatening to overflow the

bowl.

And now it was his.

Jason didn't cast a spell. He didn't try to summon a clever minion. Instead, he merely turned what was left of his fragmented attention to Thorn. The man was struggling in his grasp, trying to pull away as he pummeled Jason over and over again, breaking Jason's bones and ripping and tearing his muscles in his desperation to get away. Yet Jason felt no pain. He felt nothing. His body was a living, breathing vessel of dark energy.

"Welcome to the darkness," Jason intoned quietly.

Then he released all of that power directly into Thorn.

The obsidian energy rippled up his arm and into Thorn in a catastrophic wave of force. For a fraction of a second, the crystals in the man's body ate hungrily at the power and Jason was beginning to wonder if even this avalanche of energy wasn't enough. However, his fear proved unnecessary. As the crystals reached their limit, the gems exploded in a violent torrent of blood that showered Jason's face, ripping holes in Thorn's hands and limbs.

As the gems detonated, they launched dark mana out in a wave of energy, releasing all of the power that they had stored. It looked like Thorn's body had been punctured by dozens of Morgan's beams at the same time. The energy crashed through the marketplace, blowing holes in buildings and carving deep furrows in the ground. Any ghouls or soldiers too slow to move out of the way were obliterated by the wave of pure force.

A moment later, the energy stilled. A sudden quiet had descended over the market and Jason felt Thorn's ruined body slump against him. Surprisingly, the man was still alive; his eye fixed on Jason – filled with a mixture of unbearable pain and frustrated rage. His limbs were nothing more than ruined flesh, and he was unable to move, simply twitching against Jason as his blood stained the ground around them.

Then Jason heard a roar filled with rage and hunger. The feral undead had sensed the wave of dark mana and dense tendrils of energy still lingered in the area around Jason. As one, they pulled away from the Kin, driven into a frenzy by the concentrated mana that they sensed in the air. The horde descended upon Jason and Thorn from every direction, their limbs flailing at the air as they fought each other to be the first to drink from the source of this wellspring of power.

Within only seconds, the ghouls were there. The feral undead yanked Thorn away from Jason, ripping and tearing into his flesh in search of the dark mana that still riddled his body and spraying the air with his blood. Suddenly, Jason felt a jerk, and he was being pulled

free of the mass of limbs and blood. His vision began to fade, his mind finally slipping away into the blissful retreat of unconsciousness.

Chapter 61 - Surprising

Frank stared at the massive skeletal hand that had erupted from the ground. The surface of the strange object resting in its open palm shimmered unnaturally. The ivory hand jutting up from the earth had to be nearly fifteen feet across. Alexion had ordered his remaining troops to retreat as the hand and wrist emerged. The golden-clad sociopath was now struggling back to his feet, along with the few straggling Nephilim and Confessors that remained.

Frank's thoughts were a whirlwind.

He had been ready to die. Ready to lose everything after his men had fallen.

Now he knelt unharmed on the broken ground, staring at a skeletal hand that had appeared out of nowhere, his eyes fixed on the unusual silvery object resting in its palm. He recalled the universal system message he had seen. It had described a global quest for the gate. It had also mentioned his guild's reward for conquering the outlying villages. Their reward had been a gate piece.

Which means...

Frank didn't need to finish that thought, glancing to the side. He met Alexion's gaze for a fraction of a second – seeing the same realization reflected in his opponent's eyes.

Then Frank was moving. He lunged forward, using the little stamina he had managed to regenerate to convert his legs. His knees inverted with a sickening pop as he moved; Frank only stumbled slightly at the sudden change before regaining his balance. He knew he couldn't fight off Alexion or his remaining troops. His health was low, his men were dead, and he was outnumbered.

His only option was to snatch the strange fragment and run as fast and as far as he could. He could only hope that his enhanced strength was sufficient to carry the gate piece and that his waning stamina could hold out.

"Don't let him get the piece," someone shouted.

Frank tilted his head and saw Alexion in his peripheral vision. His opponent flapped his wings powerfully, speeding across the ground in a golden streak – his troops beginning to regroup behind him. It would only be a matter of time before they started to hurl spells at Frank's back. However, his immediate problem was Alexion, the winged-man barreling toward the skeletal hand.

"I can't let you get it," Frank muttered to himself. He couldn't let his men have died in vain. He had been given another chance, and

he couldn't squander it. Frank pressed himself harder, the mutated muscles in his legs straining under the effort as he sped forward.

The pair were neck and neck, the rest of the world fading as their focus centered on the gate piece. Frank snatched an axe from the loop at his waist, swinging it to the side to try to slow Alexion down. His opponent executed a barrel roll, nimbly avoiding the blow and continuing his headlong charge. Alexion's hand raised, pointing at Frank, and a beam of light rocketed from his palm. Frank leaped over the beam, the energy leaving a burnt line in the gray dirt behind him as he raced forward.

The gate piece loomed closer.

Frank and Alexion both reached out, trying to grab the ragged silvery metal. The object was massive, but Frank felt confident that he could carry it if he used his bear form. Even as that thought crossed his mind, Frank felt his hands begin to change, the skin thickening and his fingernails stretching into claws.

He just had to beat Alexion to it. He was so close.

Frank felt his fingers curl around the gate piece only a fraction of a second before Alexion's. The pair came to an abrupt halt, both holding a portion of the fragment on either side. Frank's arms rippled with effort as he prepared to rip the piece away from Alexion. In the distance, he could make out the Nephilim preparing to fire, pinpricks of light glowing around their hands. He could run into the forest. If Frank could move fast enough and survive the first barrage, he might be able to lose Alexion and his troops in the darkness.

The Nephilim fired, condensed beams of light rocketing toward Frank even as he heaved, pulling at the gate piece. He could do this!

However, he never got the chance.

Without warning, the skeletal hand clenched, its fingers curling inward. Light mana splashed against the ivory bone, the energy refracting in every direction, but causing little damage. Frank stumbled, falling back against the descending cage, and lost his grip on the gate piece. The strange object scraped against the palm of the skeletal hands, the sound sharp and grating.

"What is this?" Alexion muttered, staring at the hand in horror. He looked around in confusion as they were engulfed in bone – trapped inside the skeletal fist.

His question went unanswered. The fingers closed completely, sealing Frank and Alexion inside a pitch-black ivory tomb. Alexion and the gate piece vanished from sight, and Frank's hands clawed at the darkness, only to swipe at empty air. Without warning, the floor seemed to drop out from beneath him, and he was sent hurtling into a dark abyss – the void swallowing what little light and sound remained.

The first thing Jason heard was shouting. Then something hit him. Hard. Dull pain radiated out from his cheek, compounding the pain that wracked his already throbbing head.

He opened his eyes blearily to find himself looking into a pair of glowing-green eyes framed by a brutish emerald face. The beast grunted, a blast of air washing across Jason's face. *Grunt, it's Grunt.* It was getting easier for him to focus again.

Jason ignored the notifications flashing in his peripheral vision. The lights were making his head hurt more, and he tried to swipe them aside – only to find that he had a death grip on what appeared to be a severed arm. His fingers were embedded in the ruined flesh. He stared at the limb in shock, his mind struggling to process what he was seeing. It looked like the palm had simply exploded and only a hole remained.

“My sincere apologies for Grunt's blunt approach, but this really isn't a good time to be lying about,” Jerry said, his face briefly appearing above Jason and his eyes trained on something further away. Meanwhile, Grunt physically lifted Jason to a sitting position and gave him a firm pat on the back that almost sent him crashing face first into the ground again.

Jason cradled his head, trying to catch his bearings. They seemed to be sitting near the entrance to the keep. A glowing red mist drifted through the air, mainly concentrated around Jason. His eyes widened as he followed Jerry's gaze. The remainder of the Kin hovered around him, forming a protective semi-circle with their backs to the keep. They were barely holding back the horde of feral undead that clawed at the line.

Morgan marched behind the soldiers, her four arms constantly moving as she cast spell after spell into the horde. Her Abomination now stood with the Kin, and the massive creature was almost singlehandedly withstanding the worst of the attack, allowing the soldiers to hover behind it and offer support. Even so, the ghouls were slowly destroying the Abomination, each wave of creatures carving at its decayed flesh. Its fight with Grunt seemed to have cost the creature.

Why the hell is Morgan helping us now? Jason wondered, his head still feeling fuzzy.

He could have sworn the dark mage had betrayed them. Then he recalled seeing her and Jerry backstab Thorn. That memory opened

the floodgates, and other images came streaming back. The blood. Thorn's crazed eye staring at him from inches away. The power sweeping through his body. Looking down, he realized the severed limb must belong to Thorn. Staring at the arm, he rapidly processed that thought before cramming the object in his bag.

"Drink these." A handful of potions were shoved into his hands, distracting him. He looked up to find Eliza staring at him intently, her eyes demanding and her voice insistent. Jerry and Grunt were gone – having moved to help shore up the line.

"Please, hurry," Eliza demanded when he didn't move. "They need your help!"

"She has a flair for understatement," Cecil grumbled from nearby. "We're screwed if you don't get the hell up right now!"

Acting automatically despite his still-pounding head, Jason yanked the stoppers and chugged the contents of the small vials. Almost immediately, he began to feel better. His thoughts began to clear as his natural regeneration and the herbs in the tinctures replenished his waning mana. With that clarity came a better understanding of their situation.

It was bad.

It was really bad.

The remaining survivors in the courtyard were pressed up against the keep, their backs to a literal wall. Before them stood an ocean of feral undead who now filled the courtyard. Thorn might be dead – his severed arm was evidence of that – but the problem he had created certainly hadn't gone away. The only upside was that many of the ghouls were distracted, still chasing the fragments of dark mana that lingered in the market – a product of Jason's last-ditch effort to destroy Thorn. He needed to help.

Jason struggled to lift himself to his feet, but his legs buckled.

Eliza was there in a flash, her fragile form lending some support.

The world swam for a moment before settling once again. He had really overdone it this time, and it was a struggle to concentrate – even with Eliza's potions. But there was nothing for it. He needed to act, or his friends would die, and they would lose the city.

However, there was one thing that they now had in abundance. Jason could see the piles of ivory bone and the remains of dozens of Kin strewn about the battlefield. His first impulse was to summon new skeletons, but he hesitated. Those minions would still have to fight off the ghouls, and they would be revived inside the enemy line where they would be immediately surrounded. At most, that would offer a distraction – nothing more.

What they needed to do was destroy the horde.

Jason focused on the fallen Kin that littered the former marketplace, their decaying flesh trampled by the feral undead and their congealed blood coating the cobblestones and mixing with the ivory dust. They were gone. Dead. But in death, they could serve another purpose.

He hesitated. He knew what he had to do for them to survive, but it meant that these Kin would give up any chance to be interred in the mana well and rejoin their brothers and sisters. There would be nothing left by the time he was done. This was real death, and there was no coming back. A flash of crimson distracted him, and Jason turned in time to see one of the nearby Kin on the line gored by a pair of ivory claws, the tendrils of bones exiting his back and blood jetting from the wound. Droplets of bright-red blood splashed Jason's cheek, hardening his resolve.

He rubbed at the droplets absently with the back of his hand.

It was only a matter of moments before the others perished. He didn't have any choice. There was no other option.

Jason began summoning *Specialized Zombie*, focusing on the corpses in the courtyard. Tendrils of dark energy wound around his arms and hands, thickening and growing with each second that ticked past. He channeled every ounce of mana he had left – everything that the meager mana potions had allowed him to recover. It wasn't his full mana pool, but hopefully, it would be enough.

As he finished casting, tentacles of darkness rocketed from his body, racing through the air and winding among the ivory bodies of the feral undead. As the energy reached the corpses of the Kin, dozens of his former citizens suddenly re-opened bleached-white eyes – although no flicker of intelligence or life remained in their gaze. This was a small blessing as many of their bodies had been ravaged beyond redemption.

Move but stay low and slow, Jason ordered his new minions.

"What are you doing?" Cecil shouted from nearby, his eyes wide as he saw the reanimated bodies of the Kin begin to twitch and rise in the courtyard. Even the remaining soldiers on the line hesitated – watching as their fallen brethren began to slowly crawl and shift among the ghouls.

Jason ignored the short engineer. He didn't know what he could say that would explain what he was about to do. There wasn't time. Instead, he turned to Eliza where she hovered by his side, helping to prop him up. "More... more mana potions," he croaked out.

The water mage nodded quickly, digging into her pack with a frantic look in her eye. She fumbled around for a moment, cursing to herself before yanking out a handful of jars. A moment later, she was stuffing the potions into his hand, and he was pouring their contents

down his throat. He swallowed hard, giving his body a few precious seconds to absorb the energy. He needed just a little more time.

Each moment cost them dearly.

Jason watched – numb – as the feral undead pressed their attack, ignoring the newly summoned corpses in the courtyard. Their attention was focused solely on the dense pockets of mana that still lingered in the air and the thin line of survivors protecting the keep. The line of Kin buckled under the attack, and the blood of more soldiers stained the ground.

Morgan never quit. A feral skeleton ripped open the throat of a nearby soldier, sending him hurtling backward. The mage grabbed him with one of her arms, tossing him out of the way with surprising strength. Then she stepped into the pocket in the line, releasing multiple blasts of dark energy that sent the ghouls stumbling backward. Morgan surged into the enemy horde as rings of obsidian formed around her body. Only a second later, the dark mana exploded in a concussive blast, sending the ghouls toppling backward into each other and giving the defenders a brief respite.

The mage had bought them a few precious seconds, but Jason couldn't wait any longer. The creatures were already beginning to recover, and the blast of energy had drawn the attention of more of the feral undead lingering in the center of the market.

This would have to be enough mana.

"Get ready to take cover," Jason grunted. Cecil simply stared at him in confusion, his gaze shifting back and forth between the undead and Jason. Then a lightbulb seemed to go off in his head.

"Get down!" he screamed. "Everyone get down now!"

Jason didn't wait. He couldn't wait.

His hands began to wind through the gestures of *Corpse Explosion*, activating the spell's secondary effect. He planned to detonate all his minions simultaneously. The zombies had crawled and dragged their ruined bodies into position, evenly spacing themselves out among the ghouls. A tooltip lingered in his peripheral vision, warning him that this would cost all of his mana. Before turning into a Shade, this had just left him weakened. Now, he couldn't be sure if it would kill him or not. Despite how many times he had died in-game, the thought still made him hesitate, and his fingers slowed.

Jason gritted his teeth and forced himself to continue. He didn't have time to second-guess himself. Within only moments, he could feel the end of the spell nearing. The energy winding around his hands began to reach a critical mass as the last traces of his mana were funneled into the spell. The dark energy swept around him in a whirlwind, blocking his view of Kin and the endless sea of native undead.

“I’m sorry,” Jason whispered.

Then he completed the spell.

A cascade of explosions rocked the marketplace – dark energy erupting from over a hundred zombies simultaneously. The blast was so intense that it blotted out the sky – sucking in what little light the occasional flash of lightning offered. As the explosions continued, the dark energy shredded the feral undead. Tendrils of mana ripped apart the bones that made up their bodies and filled the marketplace with a cloud of thick ivory dust.

At the last second, the Abomination hurtled forward protectively, creating a pocket for the remaining defenders. The dark mana streamed around the monster’s malformed body, rocketing past the Kin that huddled behind the creature. However, there was a limit to what even the Abomination’s magically reinforced endurance could bear. The blasts ripped away its decayed flesh, gore sloughing off its body in waves. As the energy began to peter out, the monster’s ivory frame was visible beneath its ruined skin. Then it slumped to the ground, unmoving.

Jason had been knocked off his feet by the blasts, and his ears were ringing – the high-pitched whine warring for dominance with the piercing pain that penetrated his skull. However, one thing was still clear to him. He was still alive – although, part of him was starting to wish he wasn’t.

Corpse Explosion (Modified) Complete

Your health has reached zero!

Martyrdom activated.

Jason could only bark out an incredulous laugh as he saw the notification in his combat log. The game had treated that as a selfless sacrifice? Destroying the remains of hundreds of his own people to save the few that remained?

“Are... are you okay?” Eliza asked him nervously, her face hovering above him. She was already unstoppering another potion and raising it to his lips.

“No. No, I’m not,” Jason said softly. “I haven’t been okay for a long time.”

She just looked at him quizzically but held her tongue.

As Jason’s headache receded once again, he managed to sit up on his own, pushing away Eliza’s offer to help. What he observed in the courtyard made his jaw go slack. The marketplace was covered in ivory dust and bone, dozens of craters evidencing where each of the zombies had detonated. The feral horde had been reduced to a few

dozen injured creatures. They scrambled around the marketplace helplessly, their limbs broken and fractured. Jason could see more running down the side streets, retreating to other parts of the city. The horde was broken, and the creatures' frenzy had given way to self-preservation.

The remaining Kin stood around Jason protectively – looking shell-shocked but very much alive. Their armor was broken and torn, each man and woman stained in a motley red and white as they stared at the carnage in the courtyard. They looked like they had just been through hell; Jason supposed that they had.

With a grunt, he struggled back to his feet. The battlefield didn't look any better standing. The buildings ringing the courtyard had been ravaged and were now little more than ruins. An almost endless number of bodies littered the former marketplace. All three barricades were now piles of rubble, the broken wooden splinters and the remains of the undead creating a series of macabre ramps into the courtyard.

"Congratulations! I do believe we won!" Jerry suddenly shouted, throwing his arm around Jason's shoulders. This earned him more than a few skeptical looks from the Kin nearby – who most certainly didn't look like celebrating.

"This is winning?" Jason wondered in a muted voice.

"Well, I'll admit the circumstances aren't *ideal*," Jerry added, his expression sobering. "It certainly cost us a great deal. But, if I've learned anything during my life, it's to take a victory when it's offered. There will be a time to mourn the price later."

Jason saw some wisdom in that, he supposed. Although, it was a difficult pill to swallow in the face of their losses – and his incessant, pounding headache. He just wanted to sleep, and, at this point, he wasn't certain if he cared whether he woke up again. Even as this thought crossed his mind, he was forced to discard it. There was still much to do. They needed to finish off the remaining ghouls and search for survivors. They also needed to alert the civilians hidden inside the keep. They could use a hand cleaning up this mess.

However, the game world – and Alfred – didn't seem to be done with him.

The ground of the market began to shake. The vibrations started gently but quickly grew in strength. Jason wobbled, trying to maintain his balance as the earthquake continued. Meanwhile, the ground in the center of the market began to crumble and crack, splitting apart in deep furrows. At the apex of the fault lines erupted a massive bone fist, the skeletal fingers penetrating the soil and debris before stretching into the sky.

"Oh, come on," Jason muttered to himself. "Can't we catch a

break. Just one?

“Kin, prepare yourselves,” he shouted, addressing his soldiers.

The weary and injured undead responded to this call, marshaling themselves into a haphazard semi-circle around the skeletal fist that now rested in the center of the market, clutching at their weapons, and whispering prayers to the Dark One. Jason was tempted to do the same, his knuckles white as he held his staff at the ready. They couldn’t take much more.

The skeletal hand slowly unfurled, its fingers drifting open with the creak and snap of bone scraping against bone. As the hand opened fully, Jason saw that a massive fragment of some unknown substance rested in its palm. The strange object wasn’t alone. Two other individuals stood beside it, their palms resting on its surface and their weapons held at the ready. One was wearing heavy gold-plated armor – its once-shining surface now dented and clouded with dirt. The other was a hulking man, his body almost entirely stained in dried blood and his eyes wild as he glanced around the courtyard.

In their current state, it took Jason a moment to recognize the pair, his tired mind struggling to catch up. Then he realized that it was Frank staring back at him, familiar lightning crackling up the length of his axe, which meant that the man standing beside him must be Alexion. Jason’s nemesis seemed to be struggling to understand where he was, his eyes flashing with golden energy as he surveyed the undead soldiers surrounding him cautiously.

“Uh, hey Jason,” Frank said, meeting Jason’s gaze. “I guess I brought you some presents.”

Chapter 62 - Cruel

“I guess you did,” Jason replied to Frank, a grim smile tugging at the corners of his mouth.

He turned his attention to his nemesis, noting the way he crouched defensively, his sword raised. “Hello, Alex. Or I suppose I should call you Alexion here. If we had known we were expecting guests, we would have tried to clean up a little,” Jason offered.

As he spoke, Jason made a subtle gesture at Frank to get his attention, motioning for him to move away from Alexion. A glance at his system UI confirmed Frank’s health was low. Frank took the hint and backed away, keeping his eyes on Alexion even as Eliza moved to hand him a batch of potions.

Alexion slowly lowered his sword, an impassive expression lingering on his face. He was completely outnumbered and surrounded. The Kin stared at him menacingly, and a line of archers formed among their ranks, arrows drawn and pointed at Alexion. Despite their haggard appearance, they were still more than enough to kill him.

“It does look like your city has seen better days,” Alexion remarked, gesturing at the ruined courtyard, ivory debris and corpses riddling the ground. “Although, I’m sad to see that the invasion proved insufficient to wipe this place off the map.”

Jason snorted. “It will take more than a few ghouls to best us.”

“Indeed,” Alexion replied. His hand still clutched his sword tightly, and he made no move to drop the weapon. “What now? I suppose you’ll kill me?”

“Now, now, don’t be so hasty,” Jason offered. “Killing you seems a little extreme. Perhaps we can talk for a second. Think of it as a party – we certainly have plenty of guests.” He gestured at the line of Kin to the left, and Alexion turned his head slightly to survey the collection of archers.

Jason used this window to look over at Eliza. The water mage still hovered beside Frank, inspecting his wounds, but she noticed Jason staring. He glanced meaningfully between her and Alexion, causing Eliza’s brow to furrow in confusion. Frank saw the exchange, and he leaned down, whispering in her ear. The water mage’s eyes widened. She gave a curt nod and clutched at one of her wands as she started to edge around Alexion to the right. Frank moved back to the line of Kin, passing among their ranks and issuing a series of hushed orders.

Jason just needed to buy some time.

"I see you have me at your mercy. So, what exactly do you want to discuss?" Alexion demanded, facing Jason squarely. "It seems that you have the gate piece," he offered, gesturing at the fragment behind him.

Jason's eyes widened slightly as he glanced at the strange hunk of metal. He had seen the universal system notice, but he hadn't realized that Frank had already secured the piece. His friend had apparently delivered more than one present.

Recovering quickly, Jason replied, "Well, there's still the matter of the undead slaves you took in Fastu. Why are you kidnapping civilians, by the way? Even for you, it seems a bit low. Or perhaps it's a fetish thing..." He trailed off, hearing Jerry's snort of amusement behind him. Perhaps he had been spending too much time with the innkeeper.

Alexion grimaced, ignoring Jason's barb. "Civilians?" he echoed, his voice incredulous. "This is a *game*. They are nothing more than NPCs – to be spent and discarded. Or to be traded for coin."

Frank surged forward angrily, brandishing his axes, but Jason motioned for him to stand down. He hadn't missed the fact that Frank had arrived alone. He had likely seen many of the Kin fall already. Jason could sympathize. They had lost many lives today.

"To think I've been worried that you are a real threat," Jason murmured. "It's becoming clear just how little you understand this world." This statement caused Alexion to start, the gold-clad man glaring at Jason. "You see this market? This wasn't caused by a traveler. A single enemy did this. An NPC did this."

Alexion hesitated, his eyes scanning the destruction in the courtyard with an appraising expression. "One man..." he muttered.

"Indeed. The NPCs of this world are not to be treated lightly. We are the trespassers here," Jason replied, arching an eyebrow. "Now answer my question. What did you want with our people?"

Alexion smirked. "We wanted to *sell* them. We still will. I came through the portal with your fat friend here, but my men are still alive, and I'm certain that they will return to the Crystal Reach with the slaves."

Jason spared a glance at Frank and saw the truth of Alexion's statement mirrored in his friend's eyes. As he had suspected, his friend must have been on the losing end of his exchange with Alexion. That would explain his haggard appearance and low health. *He must have tried to grab the gate piece as a last-ditch effort*, Jason thought to himself.

Turning back to Alexion, Jason's expression hardened, his mana surging angrily. That meant those people were likely out of their

reach. They were in no condition to aid anyone. And even if they sent help now, Alexion's men would be long gone before they arrived. That just meant even more of the Kin had had lost their lives. However, the cause of their suffering was standing in front of Jason. This time, he wouldn't have to hunt down his enemy.

"Then it looks like we have another score to settle," Jason said darkly, his voice echoing with power and a dark aura radiating away from his body. Almost instinctively, he summoned a *Soul Slash*, the blade of obsidian energy arcing away from his staff.

Alexion's grip tightened on his sword as Jason took a single, ponderous step forward. The Kin behind Jason shuffled anxiously, ready to strike. "Then let's end it. I'm not afraid to die," Alexion retorted, readying himself.

Jason barked out a harsh laugh. "Die? What makes you think I plan to kill you?"

Alexion looked confused, his brow furrowing. "What do you mean?"

"Well, you see, if we were to kill you here, then you would just respawn somewhere else – likely back in the Crystal Reach," Jason explained, approaching slowly. Alexion was starting to look nervous, his attention fixed solely on Jason's dark form.

"I have something much better in mind," Jason continued. "Why don't you stay a while? We have some nice accommodations that would fit you perfectly. It might not be what you are used to, but I'm sure they will grow on you over time."

Alexion's eyes widened almost imperceptibly. "What are you saying?" With his eyes glued on Jason, Alexion didn't seem to be aware of the mist that was creeping around his feet, the moisture glowing with a sickly yellow light and thickening swiftly.

A grin crept across Jason's lips, his eyes glinting with dark energy. "I'm saying that you aren't going anywhere."

Realization dawned in Alexion's eyes, and he suddenly twisted his sword, moving to slice his own throat. Yet he was too slow. The yellow moisture accumulating around his feet shot upward, enveloping his face and nose in a thick fog, even as the dark mages among the Kin released a wave of curses, the occasional needle managing to pierce his armor and dramatically slowing Alexion's movements.

A moment later, Jason's nemesis crashed to the ground, unconscious. They had barely stopped Alexion in time, the line of blood on his neck evidence of the close call. As Jason watched the paladin's prone form, his smile widened. He gestured at two of the Kin who stood nearby, and the undead soldiers snapped to attention.

"Strip him of his weapons and armor," Jason ordered. "Inspect

him carefully. Don't leave anything on him that he could use to hurt himself. Then I want him placed in one of the tower cells. Post guards. I want eyes on him at all times."

Jason hesitated, watching the soldiers. "Let me be very clear. Do not let him harm himself – under any circumstances." They gave him a curt nod in return before moving forward to carry out his orders.

"Why not just kill him?" Eliza asked, stepping back around the bone fist, her wand clutched in her hand and the yellow mist beginning to recede. Her eyes glowed a brilliant blue, and her voice was impassive, entirely devoid of emotion. "He just admitted that he took slaves. He deserves to die."

"Perhaps he does. But this will be even worse than death," Jason answered, his gaze still fixed on Alexion. It seemed the universe had decided to toss him a bone after all. "If we kill him, he'll simply respawn in the Crystal Reach and immediately go back to harassing us. However, if we imprison him and keep him from killing himself, then there's no way for him to return to the Crystal Reach. His avatar will be trapped here, and he will have to roll a new character."

"I guess we'll get to see if his god's favor lasts through a re-roll," Frank muttered, a smirk on his lips.

Eliza looked at Jason in surprise, her gaze darting between him and Alexion's prone form. "Oh," she said quietly. "Oh, shit."

"I'll admit it's a little dark," Frank offered with a grimace. "But this asshole deserves it." He punctuated this statement by kicking Alexion's unmoving body. "He's killed dozens of the Kin and has been a royal pain in our ass since day one."

"Besides, it's the logical choice," Morgan offered as she stepped forward. She had found another robe at some point, tucking away her extra set of limbs beneath the heavy fabric. "It's the *necessary* choice."

At the sound of Morgan's voice, Jason turned, his dark eyes flashing menacingly. He hadn't forgotten what the mage had done, and she still had much to answer for. At a gesture, the remaining Kin turned to face the dark mage, their weapons at the ready once again. Morgan froze, raising her hands into the air in a placating gesture, her gaze fixed on Jason.

"That's an interesting observation coming from you," Jason said, sweeping his staff forward as he advanced toward Morgan. "In your case, I don't need to worry about you returning from beyond the grave. You have sixty seconds to explain yourself, or we'll be painting this courtyard with your blood."

"What are you doing?" Frank asked, confusion riddling his face.

"I'll explain later," Jason answered tersely, his mana throbbing in his veins and urging him to kill the mage. She was responsible for

many, many deaths. For the near destruction of his city. "For now, Morgan needs to tell us a story. Her life depends on it."

The dark mage met Jason's gaze evenly, unperturbed by the bloodlust that radiated off him in waves. "Now this is the dark regent I was meant to serve," she murmured, watching him. "A man that can make hard choices to save his people. A ruler that acts with ruthless efficiency."

"You are wasting your time," Jason grunted. "Explain. Now."

Morgan sighed, rubbing at her neck. "Do you remember the mission you gave me several weeks ago? You asked me to find the gate pieces, no?"

"I remember," Jason answered tersely.

Morgan met his eyes again, her expression unapologetic. "Well, I spent days scouring the scrolls and tomes that I recovered from the keep. There were very few mentions of these gates or the fragments. Even more disturbing, it appeared that references to the gates had been intentionally purged from those writings. Pages were ripped out and lines of text inked through. In short, I reached a dead end." She hesitated, grimacing as she recalled the memory.

"That's when Thorn approached me."

Morgan waved a hand as she continued, "I expected him to kill me. I assumed he was making the rounds of the Shadow Council, knocking us off one-by-one. I was wrong.

"Instead, Thorn made me an interesting offer. Apparently, his Order had been watching me for some time – since before the fall of Lux. They were concerned that the Dark One might tap me as his chosen. Flattering, really. Thorn sought to prey upon my presumed resentment. He assumed that I wished to be the Dark One's avatar. He asked me why I wasn't the one leading this city. Then he offered me rulership of this kingdom in return for my help."

Jason's hand clenched around his staff, and he was already visualizing lopping the arrogant mage's head from her shoulders. The only thing that held him back was the memory of her betraying Thorn. She and Jerry had given him the window he needed to stop the one-eyed man. So, he held his tongue. For the moment, at least.

"Don't misunderstand me," Morgan continued. "My life hung in the balance, so initially I played along out of self-preservation. If I had turned down Thorn's offer right then and there, I would be dead. So, instead, I pretended to weigh it and then accepted. My thought was that I could simply report the event to the Council, and we could take appropriate measures."

Morgan leaned forward, a hungry smile appearing on her face. The expression felt unnatural, and Jason suddenly realized it was one of the few times he had ever seen her smile. "Then I had another idea.

What if I just kept going? I could endear myself to Thorn, and he might reveal more information regarding the gates. He might give me an opportunity to betray him. The chance to *kill* him.”

“You’re claiming that you were working as a double agent?” Jason asked, tamping down on his anger. This story was unexpected, but he detected an element of truth in Morgan’s words. She had always helped him – which was why her betrayal had come as a shock.

“I am not *claiming* anything. My actions speak for themselves,” Morgan retorted forcefully. “We would not be having this conversation if not for my choices. Thorn is dead, and we stand here – alive and victorious.”

Jason gestured at the ivory remains that littered the marketplace. “We would also have avoided this battle, the deaths of hundreds of our own soldiers, and the destruction of our city. And don’t think that I have forgotten that you repurposed the injured Kin to create that... that creature,” he added, motioning toward the remains of the Abomination. The remaining soldiers in the market shuffled uncomfortably.

“I’m not claiming that the price was small,” Morgan replied with a shrug. “However, I worked with what was given to me. If I had chosen a different path – if I had come to the Council – Thorn might have noticed. I have no doubt he was having me watched closely.

“Besides, ultimately, the outcome was favorable. We destroyed Thorn and his little band of sycophants. We have also conquered the outlying area around the city, imprisoned your nemesis, and we have secured the gate piece and valuable intelligence.”

Morgan met his eyes. “I did what was *necessary* to protect this city and to preserve the Dark One’s power. Or did you think that Thorn would have simply stopped if I had refused him? He would have found another way. There are other dark mages. However, I would no longer have been in a position to help. In fact, I would likely be rotting in my old graveyard right now.

“So, tell me, Jason, what would *you* have had me do?” Morgan demanded, her eyes flashing with obsidian energy, causing the Kin to shift anxiously and their grips on their weapons to tighten.

Jason carefully considered what Morgan had just said. What would he have done differently? He was angry that Morgan had betrayed them and had concealed her actions from the Council, but she was right that it had led to their victory – even if it had come at an exorbitant price.

He was reluctant to admit it, but some part of him also admired what she had done. Her plan was cunning. Her strategy had used people like pawns on a chess board, but she had also obtained results.

Jason couldn't help but think of Gloria and George as he stared into Morgan's eyes. They were filled with the same cruel, cold light. More important, he knew that he needed that – that ruthlessness – if he was going to survive, both here and in his own world. Even now, he knew he still had much to learn.

"There is some truth to your words," Jason finally admitted.

He paced forward, a blade of darkness sliding away from his staff as he summoned another *Soul Slash*. Despite her attempt to remain calm, he could see Morgan squirm under his gaze, shifting her weight ever-so-slightly. He had no doubt that her other set of arms was moving beneath her robe, preparing to cast if he attacked.

As he neared Morgan, he leaned close so that only she could hear his words. "I know you would try to retaliate if I struck you here, but I want you to understand something right now. I don't care. Death cannot stop me. I would come back, and you would still be dead. You cannot defeat me, and I only continue to grow more powerful with each day that passes. If I wanted you dead, then you would be."

Morgan flinched slightly at his words but kept quiet. "I will let you live because you are useful to me and to this city. However, if you ever do something like this again, I will destroy you utterly. Your soul will not reside in the well. I will *erase* you from this world. Do I make myself absolutely fucking clear?"

"Yes," Morgan replied tersely. Despite her calm tone, her hands trembled slightly. Perhaps for the first time, Jason saw genuine respect in her eyes.

Jason turned to address the Kin. "Stand down. Go tend to the wounded and hunt the remaining ghouls. Jerry will give you your orders until Riley returns."

Jerry gave him a mock salute and spared a final glance at Morgan, a grin tweaking the corner of his mouth. Then he pivoted on his heel and marched off, shouting orders to the Kin – the soldiers glaring at Morgan and muttering amongst themselves. Grunt also snorted at the mage as he passed, his glowing-green eyes less than friendly as he turned to follow Jerry. He apparently hadn't forgotten his encounter with the Abomination.

Jason shifted his attention back to Morgan. "Gather the bones and take them to the training yard. Conscript help if you need it. We may need those materials soon." The mage gave him a single nod and then shuffled off, her staff thumping rhythmically across the ground. Jason's eyes followed her as she walked away, the icy bloodlust still pulsing through his veins.

As the others drifted away to perform their duties, Frank approached him. Jason stood rigidly, his mind wheeling and head still throbbing. He wasn't sure if he had just done the right thing.

Although, he was beginning to realize that there didn't seem to be any "right" answers – at least, not anymore. The line had gotten blurry a long time ago.

"It seems that I missed a lot," Frank began hesitantly.

"I guess you have," Jason replied in a quiet voice. Then he refocused his attention on his friend, trying to shake off his dark thoughts. "So tell me, what happened with Alexion?"

Frank winced, his eyes shifting away from Jason. "That's a long story. I'm not certain where I should start."

"We have some time," Jason replied evenly. "Why don't you start at the beginning."

Chapter 63 - Victorious

Jason stood in the keep's control room, his gaze fixed on the phantom image of the city that was projected across the room's circular floor. His expression was grim. He had inspected the city as Frank debriefed him on what had happened in Kelton and his encounter with Alexion. At ground level, the devastation hadn't seemed quite as bad. The occasional pack of ghouls still roamed the city, but the Kin were now sweeping each street – systematically eradicating the feral creatures.

However, up here in the control room, Jason was able to obtain a much more comprehensive report on the damage. Here, he was finally able to see the full scope of the war that Thorn had waged against them, detailed numbers and damage reports scrolling in his peripheral vision. They had won, but the victory had cost them dearly.

The southern gate was a wreck. His Drones and Death Knights had wreaked havoc on the fortification; the explosive crystals had carved human-sized holes and craters in the wall. A screen projected beside the wall highlighted several areas of the wall in red – identifying structural damage. This was in addition to the massive ramp of bone that now rested along the wall and the damage the feral undead had caused to the gate itself. It would likely take weeks to clear the debris and repair the fortification.

Jason's gaze shifted to the southern portion of the city, inspecting the dilapidated buildings. Eliza's traps had slowed down the ghouls, but that had also forced the creatures to find alternate paths to the market. They had ripped into the old wooden buildings, scaling the structures, and running across the roofs. When that proved too slow, they had burrowed *through* the structures, their claws making short work of the decaying wooden beams. Most of the repairs that Grunt and his construction crews had made had been entirely undone, and dozens of buildings had collapsed due to the structural damage caused by the ghouls. Even with their losses, they were now short on housing again.

Then there was the market – or the *former* market. The stalls had been destroyed when the materials were repurposed to build fortifications around the courtyard. Those barriers were now little more than splintered wood. What remained of the buildings ringing the market didn't look much better. In the time it had taken Jason to fight Thorn, the feral undead had ravaged the structures, leaving little more than heaping piles of splintered wood. Oh, and they now had a

somewhat intimidating bone hand jutting from the middle of the marketplace with a rare artifact resting in its palm.

So, there was that.

The property damage alone would cost them a fortune to repair. He idly wondered if there was such a thing as a fantasy insurance company. Jason could only imagine that his premiums would be crazy given how often he managed to destroy his own city.

And then there were the casualties. They had lost hundreds of troops and civilians between the attack on the city, Frank and Vera's quest to conquer the outlying towns, and Alexion's raids. They had been able to recover some of those losses by converting the border villages and their residents, but most of the towns had already been wiped out by the native undead. A glance at the area map also confirmed that William had a sizable stockpile of corpses waiting in Peccavi to be delivered. This would help defray some of their losses, but the bottom line was that an unleveled civilian was a poor replacement for a trained and geared soldier. It would take time to build back to their former strength.

Time. It all came back to *time*.

Jason winced, glancing at the mail icon on the righthand side of his system UI. He had four emails waiting for him after the battle. The committee had called a hearing tomorrow. It was widely expected that Senator Lipton would announce whether the committee would allow the CPSC to re-open the investigation into Cerillion Entertainment.

He channeled his dark mana forcefully and let the chill energy wash through him, trying his best to quash the mountain of worry that he could feel building in the back of his head as he considered the outcome of the hearing. The sensation swept away most of his doubts and fears, leaving him feeling blissfully numb. Although, he knew the relief was fleeting. Eventually, he would have to log off, and he couldn't flee to the dark mana in the real world.

Jason sighed, rubbing at his eyes tiredly. As he did so, he noticed a flickering notification in his peripheral vision and he swiped at it. As usual, he had deactivated most of his notices during the battle, and he was immediately met with a barrage of windows.

x37 Level Up!

You have (185) undistributed stat points.

x4 Skill Rank Up: Staff Combat

Skill Level: Intermediate Level 7

Effect 1: 16% Increased damage and accuracy.

Effect 2: 4% Increased speed and reaction time.

x4 Skill Rank Up: Dodge

Skill Level: Intermediate Level 9

Effect 1: 9.5% Increased speed and reaction time.

Effect 2: 2.6% bonus to Dexterity.

x3 Spell Rank Up: Soul Slash

Skill Level: Intermediate Level 3

Mana Cost: 500 mana/second.

Effect 1: 360% damage increase on strikes and the blade ignores light and medium armor.

Effect 2: -6.5% channel cost.

x3 Skill Rank Up: Mana Mastery

Skill Level: Intermediate Level 7

Effect 1: -9.0% Mana Cost.

Effect 2: 4.0% Faster Cast Rate.

x2 Skill Rank Up: Custom Skeleton

Skill Level: Intermediate Level 9

Effect 1: You may raise a custom skeleton using nearby bones. The skeleton's max level is calculated as $\text{Willpower}/7.0$.

Effect 2: Mana cost reduced by 8.5%.

x2 Spell Rank Up: Corpse Explosion

Skill Level: Intermediate Level 6

Effect: Increased damage and radius (Currently $1.15 \times \text{Health}$).

Effect 2: 6% increased blast radius.

Alternate: Destroys all summoned zombies in the caster's line of sight at the cost of 100% of the caster's remaining mana.

x2 Skill Rank Up: Martyrdom

Skill Level: Beginner Level 3

Effect: Player may be injured to -150 health/mana before dying. Only activated when sacrificing yourself for a teammate or a cause greater than yourself.

It took Jason a moment to make his way through the list of notifications. They might have suffered hundreds of casualties and a dramatic amount of property damage, but these large-scale battles were undoubtedly good for leveling.

He also had 185 stat points to allocate. He wasn't keen on

adding those points blindly to *Willpower*, although that stat still scaled quite well. It increased the now-lower level cap on his skeletons, increased his mana pool – which now also increased his health – and increased his mana regeneration. In addition, the damage of his *Soul Slash* was linked to *Willpower*.

However, he could also supplement his effective health by using *Bone Armor* and his new *Custom Skeleton* design. He wasn't positive that he needed more damage. If anything, he needed to be faster, stronger, and able to fight for more extended periods. He still had no ranged damage abilities, and he needed to get close to be effective. The fight with Thorn had also reinforced how far he still had to go. Even with Riley's sacrifice, he had barely kept up with the one-eyed man.

The memory of Riley's death made him wince. He could still see the blood trickling down her face and the desperate look in her eyes. He knew that she had covered for him – again. If he had been able to avoid Thorn's attacks, she wouldn't have had to face the man alone. She might not have died. The fact that she had been able to keep up with Thorn by herself and without any special buffs was a testament to just how much better she was in combat. Jason suspected he would never be able to truly compete with Riley or Frank except in rare circumstances, but he shouldn't be a liability. He needed to try to close the gap.

Grimacing, Jason made an abrupt decision. With a few quick gestures, he dumped his points equally into *Dexterity*, *Strength*, and *Endurance*, bolstering the hard-won gains he had made during his training in the challenges. With that done, he pulled up his Character Status.

Character Status

Gender:

Male

Class:

Warrior

Level:

100

H-Regain/Sec:

15000

M-Regain/Sec:

6000

Strength:

1000

Endurance:

1000

Willpower:

1000

Affinities

Isk:

Water:

Earth:

Despite their losses and how this conflict had highlighted his own weaknesses, he could grudgingly admit that the encounter with Thorn had forced him to grow stronger. The combination of his training, the challenges, and the battle with the feral undead had pushed him forward at an incredible pace.

It also occurred to Jason that his surviving troops had likely experienced substantial level gains as well – something that he hadn't considered when he was reviewing their losses. They might have fewer troops, but those soldiers who had survived should be dramatically stronger since they would have shared in the experience of killing the feral undead.

Perhaps things weren't quite as bad as he had first thought.

Without warning, two additional notifications appeared in front of him, providing status updates on his quests.

Quest Update: Bridging the Gap (Universal Quest)

During your encounter with Thorn, he mentioned a “gate.” You have now determined that these fragments are part of an ongoing competition among the gods. You have also secured the first gate piece, although it is currently unclear how many of these fragments you will need to recover or what you will need to do once you have secured all of the gate pieces. You should investigate this matter further and time is of the essence – the other travelers will soon be hunting for the gate pieces as well.

Difficulty: S

Success: Recover the gate pieces (total unknown).

Failure: Unknown

Reward: Unknown

Quest Complete: Righteous Retribution

You have slain Thorn and his two accomplices, removing the

immediate threat to the Twilight Throne. However, you suspect that Thorn was only one member of the Order. This may not be the last that you hear from these sycophants.

Difficulty: S

Success: Defeat Thorn.

Failure: Lose or quit?

Reward: Unknown air relic.

Jason rubbed at his neck as he reviewed the quest notifications. It seemed that there was still much to learn about the gate pieces – yet another item on his endless to-do list. However, he could at least feel some small sense of triumph at having defeated Thorn. They had won – he had to keep reminding himself of that.

His gaze fixed on the reward for Righteous Retribution. Almost instinctively, his hand rummaged in his pack, pulling out a familiar yellow gemstone. The crystal flickered and pulsed faintly, the light much dimmer than when it had been embedded in Thorn's ruined socket. He had recovered the gem from the battlefield, but he wasn't entirely sure what to do with it. At least not yet. A quick inspection revealed the following.

Unidentified Air Relic

The gemstone flickers with an unknown energy. Based on the gem's color and how Thorn used the crystal during battle, you have surmised that it is powered by air mana and somehow provides insight into the future. In many ways, this gem reminds you of the other relics that have been recovered to-date, including the Dark One's Grimoire and the orb that was taken from the Hippie's temple. However, you do not currently know how to use the gemstone or the true nature of the powers that it might hold.

"Yet another mystery," Jason murmured.

He might not have a purpose for the gem yet, but he had a feeling that it would be useful eventually. Jason tucked it carefully back into his bag. If one thing had become clear, it was that very little happened in AO by chance.

His thoughts were interrupted by a popping sound from behind him. Acting automatically, Jason's whirled, and his staff appeared in hand, a dark blade sliding out of the wood and coming to rest only

inches away from Pint's bulging, round eyes. The imp stared at him, trembling and clutching at his little pitchfork with both hands.

As soon as Jason realized it was just Pint, he slowly withdrew the blade. "What do you want?" Jason demanded.

Pint gulped. Hard. "Umm... Pretty Lady back. Council meeting downstairs."

Jason couldn't help but do a double take as he watched Pint's nervous reaction. He was ordinarily abrasive and dismissive. Yet now he was apparently afraid. Had Jason changed that much in such a short period of time? He wasn't certain. In many ways, he still *felt* like the same person, but perhaps he had discounted how grueling the last few weeks had been.

He shook his head to try to clear his thoughts. Maybe he was reading too much into it. He was most likely just on edge from the recent battle. For now, he needed to meet with the Council and discuss their next steps. There was still much to do.

"Good," Jason finally answered. "Take me to them."

Pint promptly obliged, clapping his hands. A moment later, the pair disappeared in a flash of multi-colored light, and the sapphire silhouette of the city blinked out of existence.

* * *

Jason stumbled slightly as he appeared in the meeting room. Although, he noted that he felt less off-balance than when Pint had teleported him in the past. He recovered more quickly, his body now responding instinctively to the abrupt change in scenery. He could only assume this was a product of his improved *Dodge* and *Dexterity*. The changes were subtle but still noticeable.

The first sight that met Jason's eyes was Riley. She was sitting on the edge of the table, her hand swiping at the air. As she noticed Jason, her eyes lit up, and he could feel her delighted expression mirrored on his face, a smile tugging at his lips.

"I see you respawned," he said as he approached her. "You alright?"

"I've been better," she replied with a wry grin. "But we won, so that's all that matters."

"I suppose we did," he replied grudgingly. Riley's comment only served to remind him of his recent review of their losses.

He shook off his dark thoughts, refusing to let himself dwell on that again. "Although, I think we need to talk about that sacrifice thing," he added. "What was that? I didn't realize you had some sort

of buff ability. That might have been helpful to know ahead of time.”

“Ahh, so now *you* are going to lecture me about keeping secrets, huh?” Riley said, punching his shoulder playfully.

He caught her fist and pulled her toward him. Riley didn’t put up much resistance. “Okay, I guess you have me there. But still, after you died, your body erupted into an entire garden’s worth of rosebushes. That wasn’t exactly the most comfortable experience.”

Riley bit at her lip, her face hovering in front of his. “I gained the skill in the third challenge, but the tooltip was pretty vague. Certain conditions had to be met to use it, and it didn’t really say what they were. I didn’t know whether I could use it until we were in the middle of the fight.”

Of course not, Jason thought. Leave it to Alfred – the reigning king of the vague and cryptic – to come up with an ability like that.

“Well, this is cute,” Frank said from nearby. He was leaning back in his chair, his legs propped up on the table as he watched Jason and Riley. They stayed close to each other, and Jason kept his arms wrapped around her. “When exactly did the two of you become an item? I’m sort of hurt that no one thought to tell me. Maybe I’ve been gone too long.”

“Shush. You’re interrupting young love at its finest,” Jerry said, popping up beside Frank. “Imagine the ballads that will be sung about their exploits – bathing in the blood of their enemies by day, followed by passionate love-making by night...”

“Hey!” Riley snapped, pushing Jason away as she stabbed a finger at Jerry. “There’s no love-making going on here. I’m a lady, you wannabe bard. However, I’d be happy to show you a personal demonstration of the *bloodbath* part if you’re volunteering.”

“Wannabe?” Jerry demanded in an offended tone. “I will have you know that in my youth, several of my musical masterpieces received critical acclaim from the local paper. My piece about the perils of stealing from a fire mage was met with a standing ovation!”

“By standing ovation, I think you mean that they tried to blast you to cinders,” Riley shot back. This earned her a grumble from the thief, although he didn’t leap to deny her claim – a point that was not lost on the people in the room.

As Jerry scrambled to respond to Riley, Frank shot a questioning look at Jason. He could only shrug at his burly friend. Things had been hectic lately, and Jason felt a little guilty for not bringing him up to speed, which reminded him of why they were there. A furtive glance around the room revealed that Vera, Eliza, Cecil, and Morgan were also in attendance, their expressions amused as they watched Riley browbeat Jerry.

Jason took a seat at the head of the table. Riley and Jerry soon

followed, although the archer was still glaring at the undead innkeeper. Jason spared a glance at Eliza and Cecil, suddenly realizing that he hadn't had a chance to regroup with the pair after the fight.

"I didn't get a chance to thank you two for your help," Jason began. "We wouldn't have managed to pull through without you – both with the health potions and in setting up the defenses in the market."

"I-it's no problem," Eliza said demurely, avoiding eye contact.

Cecil slapped her on the back, earning him a surprised yelp. "Don't be shy about accepting praise, girl. We killed it. Literally. Besides, our dark regent here now owes us a favor, doesn't he?"

Jason couldn't help but grin at that. The little man was a tad mercenary – something he could relate to. "Tell you what," Jason began, digging in his bag with one hand. A moment later, he retrieved the strange yellow gem that had once been Thorn's eye. He flipped it to Cecil. "I'm not certain what this is, and it's unidentified. Why don't you look into it."

Cecil snatched the crystal out of the air deftly, staring hungrily at the gem. "No problem. No problem at all," he murmured.

"Although, the first priority is getting the crafting school back up and running," Jason reminded him. Cecil gave him a distracted grunt in reply. He had already pulled a mechanical eyepiece from his back and was carefully inspecting the gem.

"When, uh, exactly did the school stop running?" Frank interjected.

Jason grimaced, but Cecil beat him to the punch, glancing up at the barbarian. "Around the same time that Thorn blew it up," he answered tersely. If Jason hadn't been there, he wouldn't have guessed from the engineer's tone that he had almost died in the explosion.

Cecil turned back to Jason. "You needn't worry. I'll have things running smoothly again in no time. I just need to conscript another building in the northern sector."

"Done," Jason said before shifting his attention to Eliza. "As for you. Your help with the potions has been instrumental in securing funds for the city and healing our troops. I'd like to continue our arrangement – assuming you are willing. In return, I'd like to offer you a 33% royalty on our net profit going forward. We've already recovered the funds I spent, although the potions that were consumed during the battle put a considerable dent in our inventory."

Eliza simply stared at him, and he could see her mental wheels churning as she crunched the numbers. Since the water mage had been helping him manage his merchant account at the player auction house, she had a good sense of how much the potions were selling for.

“T-that’s a lot of money,” she said finally.

“It is, but you’re worth it,” Jason assured her. “Although, you might not like this next part. We need to set up a trade route with the Sea’s Edge to secure ingredients going forward. This will be much cheaper than buying ingredients off the auction house, and, as you’ve mentioned before, there are some things we need from the water city that we can’t grow easily here. Unfortunately, that also means that you will...”

“...have to talk to the Hippie,” Eliza interrupted, finishing Jason’s thought. Her expression was sour, and she pushed at her glasses with her finger. “I guess that’s fair – even if I’m not looking forward to that reunion. I was just getting used to the quiet.”

“I know,” Jason said, giving her a sympathetic look.

“Maybe Fluffy has been able to rein him in a little,” Eliza added with a hopeful tone.

“I’m not sure I’d count on that,” Frank muttered in reply.

Jason chuckled ruefully. He doubted that anything could temper the water god’s... eccentricity. “Anyway, you can coordinate with Vera to secure troops and wagons,” he said to Eliza.

This earned him a sigh from the warrior. “We are already spread thin,” Vera said curtly.

“I know,” Jason replied, his expression darkening. “However, setting up those supply lines is the fastest way to bring in money. Once we have income rolling in, we can afford to outfit and train more troops.”

“The problem will be manpower,” Vera said, meeting his gaze evenly. “We have claimed the outlying villages, but, as I’m sure you are aware, most of the villagers were slain by the feral undead. A few might join our military, but it will be difficult to replace what we lost.”

“We’re also going to need regular border patrols to defend the outlying villages that are still populated,” Frank added, his expression grim. He had witnessed the deaths of those villagers firsthand – including the deaths of the Kin under his command. The Death Knights had helped, but they hadn’t been enough to stop a concerted raid. “Even with Alexion out of the way, if the other travelers and NPCs catch wind of his plan to sell undead slaves, we might see more raids of the border towns.”

Jason nodded. They both made fair points. “Capturing Alexion will keep his men at bay for a little while, hopefully. The collective-pain-in-our-ass has taken up permanent residence in one of the Keep’s towers and is under constant watch. That was one good thing to come from all of this.”

He turned his attention back to Vera. “I also spoke with

William briefly, and he will be sending the corpses he's stockpiled in Peccavi over the last few weeks," Jason continued. "That should help us add some new blood to our ranks. For now, we'll just have to make do with what we have."

"Hmm. We could send one division to the border. We still have sufficient mounts for that," Vera said, eyeing the map of the region projected across the conference table in front of them. "That may be enough for now if we aren't worried about an immediate attack. We can use another division for Eliza's trade caravan. That will leave four divisions in the city proper."

"That sounds like a workable plan," Jason said. Not that they had much choice.

Jason's attention shifted to Jerry. "What about the city and the construction projects that Grunt was working on? I notice he's not here."

"Our monstrous friend is out there as we speak, expending his blood, sweat, and tears to make our poor city pretty again." Jerry sighed, deflating slightly. "Unfortunately, we've been set back weeks. As I'm sure you have observed yourself, the destruction caused by the ghouls was a bit... severe. However, we still have a few minotaurs to assist with the heavy labor. We have prioritized reconstructing the market and the southern wall. Grunt and I can handle that task."

"Thank you," Jason said, with a nod to the innkeeper. Jerry tipped his hat in response.

Then the group turned to the last person sitting at the table, a heavy silence descending over the room.

"Well, don't all thank me at once," Morgan said haughtily.

"Thank you?" Riley demanded. "You have got to be kidding me." The others at the table echoed her anger. They had all either witnessed her confession firsthand or had heard the rumors. The news of Morgan's involvement had spread quickly. To say that she was currently reviled among the Kin was an understatement.

"I did what needed to be done, and we are all still sitting here having this lovely conversation, aren't we?" the dark mage demanded.

"We are indeed," Jason replied, his tone grim and his dark mana pulsing through his veins in a frigid torrent. "However, it will take some time for you to earn your way back into our good graces. Whether or not things worked out in the end doesn't change the fact that you acted unilaterally; you put everyone at risk."

Morgan couldn't hold his gaze, and she glanced away. Jason forcefully shoved away his anger. It wasn't helpful – even if it was justified.

"For now, your duty will be rebuilding the nests around the Twilight Throne," Jason said. He gestured at the map on the table.

“With that in mind, I have an idea.”

Jason pointed to the villages to the south and east of the Twilight Throne. “Many of the towns in these areas are currently unpopulated – a product of the feral undead that you helped create,” he added, staring pointedly at Morgan. “The villages ringing the city are also evenly spaced, creating a loose circle around the Twilight Throne.

“These towns may be perfect staging points to construct new nests, using the villages as a base of operations for each cluster. Assuming Morgan can use her crystals to manipulate the nests the same way she did before, it may be possible to use the nests to create creatures of varying strength. We could then station small garrisons and a handful of merchants in each town.”

Frank cocked his head as he stared at the map. “You mean you want to create tiered leveling areas, don’t you? Like one town would have level 50 creatures, and one would have level 100 creatures.”

“Exactly,” Jason said, a smile curling his lips. “One of the problems we had before is that the undead creatures were difficult to find, and they were much too powerful for new players to handle. This made leveling a pain, even for our own troops, and it discouraged players from starting in the Twilight Throne.

“However, if we could control the power level of each nest, we could create more friendly starting areas for new players and an easier way for them to level. Once they have out-leveled an area, they could just move to the next town. This would also be a useful training system for our own soldiers too,” he added, glancing at Vera. The general had leaned forward during this conversation, her pale eyes gleaming thoughtfully.

Jason looked back at Frank. “Assuming we can get this set up and a decent stream of income coming in, it might also offer a way to recruit new members to Original Sin. Hell, the travelers might even be able to help us curate the areas and control the power level of the undead creatures. For example, we could offer quests to kill certain monster-types and to return bones to the vendors in each town so that we could maintain the nests.”

“We could also promise them a streamlined leveling process and maybe some free equipment and potions,” Frank muttered to himself, his mental wheels already turning. Jason knew his friend would be the first to catch on. They both had firsthand experience at what drove guild recruitment: the promise of loot and levels. They just hadn’t had anything to offer before.

“Damn it, that’s genius,” Frank said finally, grinning now as he stared at the map.

“Assuming it’s possible,” Jason amended, glancing at Morgan.

The dark mage was eyeing the map skeptically. "It will take time to set up, and it won't function perfectly overnight, but it is *possible*," she admitted finally. "I'll need men to move the bones and funds to create the dark-mana crystals that we will need."

"You will have both," Jason said. "We can assign you another division and Eliza can assist you with any purchases that you need to make." Vera winced at this, and Eliza watched the dark mage warily, clearly not relishing the idea of working with her. However, they would have to make do with what they had – or *who* they had.

"Alright, I think that covers the major points. Any questions or anything else to add?" Jason asked finally, looking around the table. The council members all shook their heads. "Well, then let's get to it."

With that, Jason dismissed the meeting, and the members dispersed, vanishing in flashes of multi-colored light as Pint teleported them outside the keep. Jason was soon left staring at the map on the table. Their plan was a good one, and each person's role played to their strengths. However, he couldn't help but wonder how long this lull would last before some new threat was knocking at their door.

"You don't look happy," Riley observed quietly. She and Frank had lingered in the meeting room as the others left.

"I doubt our troubles are over," Jason replied hesitantly. "Thorn and his two accomplices likely weren't the only members of the Order. We also know very little about these gates, and, by conquering the outlying towns, we accidentally alerted the entire game world that these gate pieces are valuable. Our problems only seem to multiply at every turn."

"But we're alive," Frank offered. "We still have the city. That's something."

"You're right. I know you're right," Jason said, rubbing at his eyes again as a wave of fatigue washed over him. He couldn't remember the last time he had slept.

"I guess the main problem with the gates is that we need more information," Riley added softly, as though talking to herself.

"Morgan searched the records in the keep and found nothing," Jason said.

Frank snorted. "Assuming she's telling the truth." Jason nodded grudgingly. He couldn't really challenge that. He trusted Morgan about as far as he could throw her right now. With that, the three lapsed into a tense silence, staring at the map on the table.

"From what you all have told me, the Order seems to be a lot more knowledgeable about this competition among the gods and the gates," Frank said finally. "It's a shame we don't have the ability to question them."

"We still have Thorn's accomplices," Riley suggested.

“They knew very little,” Jason said, discarding that idea. “The one whose memories I accessed didn’t even know the full scope of Thorn’s plan, much less the Order’s larger goals. It was clear that they did a good job of partitioning information. They seemed to anticipate that their agents might be captured.”

“I bet Thorn knew more,” Riley said with a frown, her hands clenching involuntarily as she mentioned their former opponent. “I’m not saying I regret that you killed him – far from it. But he might have been able to tell us more.”

Jason grimaced. Riley was right, but the former Order agent was firmly dead – pieces of his body having been spread across most of the market. There was no way he could offer them any information. He froze at that thought, his hand clutching at the material of his bag. Or was there?

“Oh shit, he has that look again,” Frank muttered, nudging Riley.

“I don’t even want to know,” Riley replied, letting out a yawn. “I need some sleep and food and sleep. Did I say sleep already?”

“Fair enough,” Jason offered with a grin. “Why don’t you get some rest. If this pans out, I’ll let you guys know.”

Riley nodded, pulling up her system UI with a few sharp gestures. Before tapping the logout button, she leaned over and kissed Jason on the cheek. “Just try not to kill too many people,” she whispered with a small smile.

Jason could only chuckle in response as a flash of multi-colored light tore through the air, and the archer disappeared.

“You going to share some details?” Frank asked, eyeing Jason curiously and motioning to the spot Riley had occupied a moment before. “You two certainly seem... friendly.”

Jason smiled ruefully. “I stopped being an idiot and told her how I feel. Turns out, that wasn’t such a bad plan.”

“Go figure,” Frank replied dryly. “And about this next crazy plan...”

“It might be better if I didn’t tell you. I’m pretty sure it would just give you heartburn,” Jason replied with a grin. Although, his amused expression wavered. His real concern was that he wasn’t sure how his friend would react to his latest plan. Perhaps he *had* changed a lot lately.

“Anyway, it’ll either work or it won’t,” Jason offered.

“Fair enough,” Frank said, shrugging. The barbarian glanced away, his eyes fixing on the map on the nearby table – hovering over the villages on the western border. His expression darkened, his mouth pinching into a thin line. Jason couldn’t help but notice that something felt off about Frank. He still tossed in the occasional joke or

jab, but it felt a little... forced. He wondered what had happened while his friend was on the road.

“You okay?” Jason asked, observing Frank carefully.

“I guess,” Frank murmured before focusing back on Jason. “This place just feels too real sometimes. I guess it’s just messing with my head.”

“I can certainly understand that,” Jason replied tentatively. “If you want to talk about it, you know where to find me.”

Frank nodded. “Thanks, man. I appreciate that.” Then he shook himself. “Maybe Riley is right. Maybe I just need some sleep. And food. And maybe a much-needed shower.” As he spoke, Frank gestured at the air, pulling up his system UI.

“Fair enough. Goodnight,” Jason said.

“Goodnight.”

A moment later, Frank too disappeared in a rainbow splash of color, leaving Jason alone. He stared at the place his friends had occupied only a moment before. He knew he needed to log out and get some rest. He had a long day ahead of him tomorrow. Yet he still hesitated, prolonging the inevitable.

Jason let out a soft sigh. Waiting wouldn’t help. He would still be forced to face his enemies tomorrow – except this other foe would be flesh and blood. He needed to be prepared.

With a swipe of his hand, he brought up the system UI and tapped the logout button. Then Jason vanished, leaving behind only a swirling kaleidoscope of color that quickly dissipated.

Chapter 64 - Conclusive

Jason sat on a familiar hard bench, the buzz and murmur of dozens of voices filling the courtroom. He shifted uncomfortably in his seat, tugging at his collar. Regardless of the outcome of the CPSC hearing, at least he wouldn't have to wear this damnable outfit again. Although, he knew his frustration wasn't really directed at the suit. He was just trying to distract himself – to push aside the worries that threatened to overwhelm him now that he was stranded here in the real world without the chill, quieting embrace of his dark mana to bolster him.

Today was the day that the committee was expected to make a decision regarding whether they would allow the CPSC to re-open the investigation into Awaken Online. On its face, it looked open and shut – the evidence weighing in favor of the CPSC. However, Jason knew that Claire's video log of Cerillion Entertainment's internal trial was a fake, and, without Claire's testimony, the evidence that Alfred had taken over his body was more tenuous. He had also gotten in a few strong shots during Gloria's interrogation. It gave him a slim hope that the senators would side in their favor.

He hoped that they could finally put this to rest.

A murmur rose from the back of the courtroom and Jason heard the doors bang shut behind him. He turned, uncertain what had caused the commotion, only to find his parents striding into the room. They marched down the rows of benches with calm, measured steps and took their seats across the aisle from Jason. His mother met his gaze briefly, giving him a look that he wasn't entirely sure how to interpret – a mixture of guilt, hope, and concern warring for dominance on her face. In contrast, his father was stoic, his eyes locked straight ahead, as though not trusting himself to look at his son.

Jason turned away quickly, hands clenching and his fingernails biting into his palms. He couldn't help but remember the last thing they had said to him – how they had looked at him and told the committee that he wasn't their son.

He needed to stay calm and composed. He had to.

"It'll be okay," Claire said softly from beside him, resting a hand on his shoulder.

Jason grunted softly in reply. He wished that he could believe her. Claire carried her own worry in her hunched shoulders and the dark circles under her eyes. He wasn't the only one with something to

lose here. Besides, even if the committee ruled in their favor, that wouldn't fix the rift between him and his parents. He wasn't certain that anything could – not at this point.

“Just look at these vultures,” Robert said, gesturing toward the reporters who filled the back of the room. Drones flitted through the air above them. Their cameras had whirled to focus on Jason and his parents, streaming video of their short exchange. “Apparently, there is no privacy left in the world.”

“It's fine,” Jason said. It most definitely wasn't, but their comments weren't helping.

He was saved from having to reassure Claire and Robert by the senators, who chose that moment to enter the courtroom. The door behind the bench swung open and the committee members filed through before assuming their usual perch behind the wooden bench. Jason noted that George and Francis sat up a bit straighter, their eyes fixed on the senators. In contrast, Gloria seemed almost relaxed as she sat at the other table facing the bench, a hint of triumph already lingering in her eyes as she glanced at George.

“Alright, everyone, settle down,” Senator Lipton said as he took his seat. He directed this comment at the gallery, the reporters and spectators still murmuring among themselves. They reluctantly quieted under the senator's stern gaze. “I wish to remind the gallery that you are expected to remain silent during this hearing. Anyone who interrupts these proceedings will be immediately escorted outside.”

His eyes swept the room, looking for understanding in the eyes of the reporters who filled the gallery. Apparently satisfied, the senator motioned to the woman beside him, and she tapped at the recorder resting on the bench.

“We have called this hearing today to announce our decision regarding whether to re-open the investigation into Awaken Online, the related VR hardware, and the game's AI director – Alfred,” Senator Lipton began, his voice carrying across the room. “However, before we get to our verdict, we would like to first address two important evidentiary issues faced by this committee.

“First, there is the matter of the video log submitted by Ms. Bastion. We will not replay the log here to prevent confusion and any further dissemination of that video,” he stated. Jason noted the frown that began to crease Gloria's lips. “The recording in question relates to a purported report by Claire Thompson. In this video log, Ms. Thompson purportedly revealed her concerns regarding the unusual activities of Awaken Online's AI director that she observed during the internal trials conducted by Cerillion Entertainment.”

Senator Lipton took a deep breath before continuing. “After

extensive forensic examination, we have confirmed that the video is a forgery. This has been verified by two independent examiners.”

This elicited a shocked reaction from the gallery, the reporters gasping in surprise. For his part, George managed to remain calm, although Jason saw the faintest hint of a smirk flit across his face. Jason had to remember to carefully school his own expression – widening his eyes and letting his mouth hang open. He wasn’t supposed to know that the video was a forgery. He felt like his performance wasn’t too bad, although he suspected he would get a chance to evaluate his own reaction when he watched the recordings later.

“Please restrain yourselves,” the senator said, glaring at the gallery. The spectators quieted quickly.

“Our examiners determined that large portions of the video were altered post-recording, specifically those portions of the video where Ms. Thompson describes the AI’s activities. It appears that these alterations were rather sophisticated and were intended to avoid detection – which explains why Ms. Bastion’s examiner missed these changes. This also explains the committee’s delay in rendering a decision regarding whether to admit the video log into evidence.

“As a result of this independent examination, the video of Ms. Thompson is being stricken from the record and will not be considered as evidence in this hearing.” The senator shifted his attention to Gloria. “Further, our committee will be conducting a separate inquiry into the source of the video following this proceeding to find the parties responsible for producing the forgery. We do not take the attempted forgery of evidence lightly, and we intend to punish anyone found to be complicit in knowingly preparing and distributing the video.”

Jason’s attention was now on Gloria. The implication of the senator’s words was that Gloria might be responsible for the forgery. The older woman looked as though she was having difficulty containing herself, fidgeting in her seat as though she wished to launch to her feet to defend herself.

Serves her right. It was satisfying to see Gloria put in her place for once.

“Now on to the second matter,” Senator Lipton continued. “Ms. Bastion and the CPSC have produced a log file from a prototype VR headset demonstrating a spike in the neural activity of a single player – one Jason Rhodes. The CPSC would have us believe that this dramatic increase in neural activity is consistent with the illicit access by the game’s AI director of Mr. Rhodes’ mind, in contravention of the AI’s security protocols. The CPSC also goes one step further, claiming that this evidence demonstrates that the AI took control of Mr.

Rhodes' body during this short window of time.

"After further examination of the log file and coordination with Cerillion Entertainment, we have determined that this record is, in fact, an authentic log file taken from the prototype VR headset lent to Mr. Rhodes, and there does not appear to be any evidence that the log has been altered. As such, the log is hereby admitted into evidence and shall be considered as part of our final decision on this matter."

The senator looked between Francis and Gloria. "Do the parties have any questions regarding the evidentiary issues presented here?"

"No, sir," Francis answered, rising slightly in his chair.

"No," Gloria answered, although her tone was grudging. She clearly wanted to argue about whether Claire's log file should be admitted, but Jason guessed that she was reluctant to make a scene with the reporters watching. Perhaps she felt the log from his headset would be enough.

"Good," the senator replied.

"Now we will render our final decision in this matter." Senator Lipton paused, and, for just a moment, his mask slipped. Beneath his gruff, no-nonsense exterior, Jason saw a tired man – a man faced with an impossible set of questions. Then the moment was gone, and the Senator reassumed his business-like demeanor.

Jason wasn't certain what to make of that single, fleeting look. However, it did nothing to quiet the heavy weight that had settled in his stomach.

"This is not an easy question that has been presented to the committee. On the one hand, we understand the CPSC's concern. Our duty is to exhaustively test the safety of the products that companies make available to the public. We are given the task of trying to anticipate safety concerns before they arise in order to protect our citizens. As Ms. Bastion mentioned in her opening statements, our history is replete with cases where our enthusiasm outpaced our caution. We do not want to repeat those examples.

"That being said, we must also balance our caution against practicality. It is not our goal to stymie economic activity and innovation. Our world is better off for the advancements in science and technology we have witnessed over the last few decades, despite the potential risks that those products may pose."

The senator folded his hands on the bench. "In short, our committee and the CPSC must strike a balance between caution and pragmatism. And that is not an easy thing to pinpoint with clarity or precision. It is a matter of *judgment*.

"The question before us presents a peculiar challenge. The technology involved in the creation of Awaken Online and the related VR technology is revolutionary. As Mr. Graham testified, Cerillion

Entertainment may very well have created the first true AI. This is an incredible achievement. At the same time, how do we safeguard that sort of product? How do we even begin to anticipate and evaluate the risks of something that is the first of its kind?

“The fact of the matter is that this game and its related software have already undergone years of testing. It has been exhaustively poked and prodded in the hope that we will be able to anticipate and avoid harm to the company’s customers. However, even this testing is insufficient to conclusively prove that the product will not cause any harm. To truly ensure that this product is safe, we need to be open to potential issues weeks, months, and even years after its launch.”

The senator motioned at Gloria. “Ms. Bastion has presented evidence indicating an unusual spike in the brain activity of one of the game’s players, an increase that is correlated directly with the deaths of two living people. This committee understands that the two teenagers entered Mr. Rhodes’ home by illegal means and they were armed. While we are not offering any judgment on the criminal or civil liability in that situation, it is our impression that Mr. Rhodes acted in self-defense. However, the matter still involves human life. We must address the question of whether it was indeed Mr. Rhodes that killed those two boys – or *something* else.

“We must also take the testimony of Mr. Rhodes and his parents to heart. It is not unusual for a teenage boy to go through dramatic changes – any parent will tell you that this is a natural part of growing up. However, dramatic changes in a person’s behavior, coupled with the other facts presented in this case, are cause for potential concern. We have conducted an independent survey of the players familiar with Awaken Online in conjunction with this hearing. They have almost universally claimed that after playing the game, their lives have undergone radical transformations – for better and for worse. Yet, again, this is merely circumstantial evidence. Correlation does not equal causation. These examples do not speak directly to whether the game is adversely affecting its players or that the game’s AI director has circumvented his safety protocols.”

The senator paused for a moment, making eye contact with Gloria. “The fact of the matter is that the log file from Mr. Rhodes’ headset is the only direct evidence presented by the CPSC that indicates that there may be an issue with Awaken Online.

“The dilemma we face is that the log file provided by Ms. Bastion is also not sufficient by itself to demonstrate that the game’s AI director violated his safety protocols or that the AI took control of Mr. Rhodes’ body. This technology is operating at the edge of its field. Only a few short years ago, this entire game system would have

seemed impossible. As a result, we have had difficulty corroborating and interpreting the data that Ms. Bastion has provided.

“After contacting many different experts in the fields of neuroscience and computer science, we were unable to obtain a general consensus regarding whether the data demonstrates that the game’s AI director assumed control of Mr. Rhodes’ body. The only point on which those experts could agree was that the data was unusual.

“In short, this evidence only indicates that it is *possible*.”

The senator paused for a moment and his gaze panned across the room. Jason could feel his breath catch in his chest, his heart hammering away wildly. His stillness was matched by the spectators in the gallery as everyone tried to anticipate the conclusion that the senator was heading toward. The tension was almost palpable.

This was it. This was a moment that would define his future.

“Even in the face of uncertainty, it is still our duty to make a decision in this matter – for good or bad. We are forced to weigh the clear advantages of this technology against the possible risk that the game’s AI and the related VR technology might pose. With this in mind, the committee has reached what we feel is a compromise.

“We are hereby re-opening the CPSC’s investigation into Awaken Online and its AI director. It is our opinion that even the possibility that the game’s AI director may have assumed control of a player’s body warrants further investigation.

“However, we are tempering our caution with pragmatism. The CPSC’s investigation will be limited in scope and duration, with those details to be addressed at a later date. This is not intended to be some sort of fishing expedition. During this investigation, we will also permit Cerillion Entertainment to continue to make Awaken Online and its VR technology available to the public.

“With that, we will conclude today’s hearing. We would like to request that both parties remain for a few minutes to discuss additional details.”

As the senator finished speaking, a hushed silence lingered across the courtroom, the audience trying to digest the committee’s verdict. Then, all at once, the air was filled with a wave of sound as everyone began speaking at once.

Jason sat in silence, a single unmoving person amid a sea of chaos. His thoughts were spinning. What did this mean? He had still been granted a reprieve. At least he could continue playing AO and maintain his own livelihood. He could survive. Yet the risk that the CPSC would discover what Alfred truly was – what he was capable of – was still there. Instead of closing the door on this issue, the committee had left it wide open.

“Hey,” Robert said, nudging him. “We need to get out of here before these reporters dogpile us.” He motioned to the security that was already creating a pocket at the end of their bench – the uniformed men the only thing keeping the horde of reporters at bay. They were already shouting questions, trying to be the first to get the group’s take on the hearing.

Jason lifted himself from the bench as though operating on autopilot. He was soon being herded out of the room along with Claire and Robert. The security quickly navigated the halls of the courthouse building, leading the group to a side stairwell that took them back to the ground floor. Apparently, they were leery about getting stuck at the elevators.

As they exited the building onto the courthouse steps, bright sunlight struck Jason’s eyes, and he put up a hand to block out the glare. Before his eyes had a chance to adjust, a roar of noise reached his ears, protestors on either side of the stairs shouting from behind the barricades erected by the local police. Digital signs flickered, and cameras flashed, creating a multi-colored splash of color and sounds that was overwhelming.

Yet Jason wasn’t focused on this chaotic scene. His attention was fixed on the pair of individuals standing near the door – his parents. They each looked at one another at the same time, and Jason felt frozen in place, his legs refusing to budge.

His mother approached him first, his father in tow. “I... I’m sorry, Jason,” she offered, tears beading at the corners of her eyes. His father rested a comforting hand on her shoulder. “I’ve wanted to say that for a while now – since we met at Gloria’s office.”

Jason remained mute, his emotions a chaotic, soupy mess. He didn’t trust himself to speak.

“We were just concerned about you,” his father added. “You have changed so much. And this... this game seems to be the source of that change. We didn’t know what to think...”

“Or what to do,” his mother added as his father trailed off, at a loss for words. “Maybe this will help,” she offered tentatively. “Maybe, after this investigation, the CPSC will be able to say once and for all whether this game poses a risk to its players.”

“Until then, we want you to come home,” his father said. “You should be with family. Forged evidence aside, it’s clear that *something* is going on here and Cerillion Entertainment is at the heart of it. You would be safer with us.”

“Please, Jason,” his mother pleaded, hope shining in her eyes. “Please come home.”

He could only stare back at them – his spinning thoughts beginning to settle. A tired numbness was replacing the whirlwind of

emotion. It wasn't his dark mana; it was resignation.

Even now they thought they knew what was best for him and they were acting unilaterally. This was just more of the same. They had sent him to Richmond and kept him there despite how much he despised the school. They felt the game had harmed him. But had they tried to talk to him about it? No, they had conspired with Gloria instead – going behind his back to do what *they* thought was best for him.

They weren't sorry for what they had done. They were sorry that they had lost. Or, at least, that the committee hadn't concluded that the game was harming him. Hell, they were probably worried about their own careers. If they were at least able to reconcile with him, it would probably look like they had still been in the right – despite the committee's verdict.

Besides, where had they been when Jason had needed them? When he told them about how Alex had framed him at school? When he was scrambling for some way to feed himself? When he spent days in jail? When he was grappling with the fact that he had killed two people? When Gloria shoved him onto a public stage and told the world he was some sort of closeted sociopath?

He felt something inside his mind finally shatter – although he struggled to put a name to it. Maybe it was some sort of hope – that people were good. That his parents really cared about *him*. That the world was fair and operated in a way that made sense. But none of that was true. It was all just an illusion – a fantasy – even less real than the video games he had clung to for an escape. Perhaps the Old Man had been right since the beginning.

All that mattered was his desire and whether he had the strength to act on it.

“No,” Jason finally said. His voice sounded strange to his own ears – cold and unforgiving. “I’m not going anywhere with you.”

He met their eyes, his gaze unflinching. “I think you both said it best. You’re not my parents – not anymore,” he said, throwing their own words back at them. “I have a new family now. One that actually cares about me.”

Jason didn't wait to see their reaction. He simply walked away, rejoining Robert and Claire and heading down the stairs toward a waiting car. He saw the looks that Robert and Claire gave him – the concern lingering on their faces as they watched the confrontation with his parents. At least one of the aerial drones had likely captured the exchange.

But he didn't care.

As Jason settled onto the leather car cushions a moment later, and the door clicked closed with a certain finality, his thoughts were

only on the future. The committee had given him an opportunity – a second chance – and he planned to take advantage of it. His parents and this entire hearing had taught him one final lesson.

The world was a cruel, chaotic place and only the ruthless survived.

Chapter 65 - Unexpected

Alexion paced his cell, wearing only a tattered cloth tunic and trousers. Jason's men had stripped him of his golden armor and weapons. His bags were gone too. The only thing that remained were his glowing wings, the extremities occasionally bumping into the rough stone walls of the cell as he trod a well-worn circle in the floor – reminding him of just how useless those wings were right now.

Two of the Kin stood nearby, robed in dark leather armor. Their pale eyes watched him impassively, and he glared back at them. They hadn't moved since he had been imprisoned here and he knew that they would only intervene if he tried to hurt himself. A glowing crimson gem was also embedded in the tower's ceiling, casting a healing aura about the room.

At this point, even suicide was starting to look like a blessing – one that was just out of reach.

He had tried everything else. His only goal was to somehow respawn back in the Crystal Reach. He had logged off and back in. He had tried waiting variable amounts of time before logging back in. He had spoken to some of the techs in the control room at the Cerillion Entertainment headquarters, which had resulted in resounding defeat despite his attempts to explain that he was the CEO's son. Apparently, the staff took the game's integrity seriously. When that hadn't worked, he had even tried praying to the Lady for assistance, but it seemed that even the goddess had abandoned him.

At every turn he had reached a dead end, and Alexion was now forced to face the obvious.

He was trapped.

Just the thought made the burning sensation in his chest bubble and froth. The hollow voice in the back of his mind only added fuel to the fire, the whispers reminding him of his *weakness*. He had the almost irresistible urge to roar his rage – only holding himself back for fear that word would reach Jason. Alexion wouldn't give his nemesis that satisfaction.

Even so, it seemed that Jason had won.

The reality was that Alexion may have lost months of work. His only escape from this place appeared to be to roll a new character and start over from scratch. He couldn't be certain whether that new avatar would assume his role as Regent of the Crystal Reach, and since the game only allowed him one avatar at a time, there would be no going back once he made that decision. With the scrutiny that the

company was currently under, it was unlikely that his father would be willing to grant him a concession.

He slammed his palms against the crystalline bars with a dull thump. The guards didn't even flinch. They just continued to stare at him with those eerie, pale eyes.

"What are you dead assholes looking at?" he demanded. He knew that they wouldn't respond – they never said anything. Bribes were one of the first things he had tried. However, the undead seemed unnaturally loyal to Jason. Although, the whispering voice reminded him that he had been caught stealing undead to sell as slaves. He would likely find no sympathy with the Kin.

"Are you antagonizing our soldiers now, *Alexion*?" a feminine voice spoke up. He whirled to find Riley watching him, a smirk on her lips. She was robed in black leather, the hems embroidered in crimson, and a crystalline bow was slung casually over her shoulder. He hadn't even heard her enter the room.

"I have little else to do," he grunted. Just the sight of Riley's mocking expression was enough to set his teeth on edge. How dare she taunt him. She had once been nothing more than a *plaything*.

"And that's not going to change any time soon," she shot back. "You will be here for a very long time – that is, unless you want to spin up a new character."

Alexion grimaced. Jason had boxed him into a corner. Even the insidious voice in the back of his mind had been forced to acknowledge that this was clever. Imprisonment was likely the only way to truly destroy one of the gods' avatars – a point that he would remember if he ever got out of this gods-damned cell.

"I can be patient," Alexion retorted, meeting Riley's gaze. "At some point, your men may drop their guard – give me an opening."

"To do what? Bash your brains against the bars?" Riley asked, pacing in front of him. "I would actually pay to see that," she murmured with a cruel smile.

Alexion noticed a flash of light in his peripheral vision, and he froze – trying to maintain his composure with Riley standing in front of him. He had an incoming message. That was one option that he hadn't considered, and he felt like kicking himself now. However, one thing was clear. It seemed that the in-game chat system was unaffected by his imprisonment.

He snorted, turning away from Riley as though disgusted, and using the movement to conceal the way he swiped at the air to bring up the message. As his eyes skimmed the few short lines of text, an involuntary grin crept across his face. Perhaps he wasn't entirely out of options.

"Oh, don't be like that, Alexion," Riley said, likely thinking she

had struck a chord. “I suspect you won’t get many of these visits. You should savor them.”

Alexion turned back to her, his eyes flashing with golden light. “I have no need to speak with you. You’re nothing more than Jason’s errand girl.” He paused, a thought occurring to him. “Where is your *master* anyway? I expected him to come and taunt me by now.”

Riley just chuckled, unaffected by Alexion’s insults. “I think you overestimate your importance. You have never been anything more than an annoyance. Now that you are rather... *occupied*, there are simply more pressing concerns.”

Alexion grimaced, carefully maintaining his act for Riley’s benefit. Meanwhile, his thoughts were racing. He expected that Jason wasn’t online. That might explain why Riley had decided to confront him herself. He had no doubt that at some point Jason would return – if nothing else, in the hope of securing some information regarding the Crystal Reach and its forces. Riley alone was still a threat, but Jason and Riley together would likely destroy his tentative plan.

If he was right, then the timing was perfect.

Riley turned away from him, walking over to a nearby window, her gaze panning across the dark city far below. “This is a fitting punishment – you trapped here. In some ways, it’s worse than anything I could have done to you.”

“How so?” Alexion muttered distractedly, trying to keep her occupied. Now that her back was to him, he only needed to turn slightly to hide his actions from the two guards. His fingers danced in the air, tapping out a short response. He just needed to buy himself a few more seconds.

“Because you will experience the same thing I felt – that sense of being trapped – backed against the wall by someone who has power over you.” She whirled back to him, her eyes glowing darkly and a small crimson circle hovering in the center of each black iris. “People say that revenge is bittersweet, but I find I quite enjoy the taste.”

Alexion saw the chat window update – a response. There was only a single line of text this time: “Get back and close your eyes.”

A smile crept across his face as he slowly backed away from the bars toward the far wall. At the same time, he saw a familiar floating ship break the cloud cover through the window behind Riley. It was a rather ordinary-looking vessel, supported by massive balloons and dozens of figures scrambling across its deck.

“Well, you better savor it,” Alexion said. “Because I have a feeling that it won’t last much longer.”

A look of confusion swept across Riley’s face and she whirled back to the window, following his gaze. Her eyes widened as she caught sight of the ship, and her hands shifted to the bow slung across

her back, her lips already trying to form a warning to the guards.

She wasn't fast enough.

Blinding light and a roar of sound erupted inside the tower. Alexion was shoved back against the far wall as though slapped by a massive, invisible hand. He slumped against the floor a moment later, his ears ringing. He had managed to squeeze his eyes shut in time, but he could still see the harsh white light through his eyelids, leaving spots in his vision as he blinked rapidly.

He pulled himself from the ground, trying to catch his bearings. What he witnessed was a scene of destruction. A massive bolt of lightning had slammed against the side of the tower near the window, melting through the stone and carving a jagged hole in the wall. Tendrils of smoke still wafted from the stone. The burnt corpses of the two guards lay on the floor and Riley had been sent flying across the small room. She let out a weak groan, shifting slightly.

She was down, but not dead.

Alexion's eyes flitted to the bars in front of him. He needed to move quickly. He summoned his mana, the golden energy rushing through his veins in a river of molten metal. He suddenly felt like he could do anything – accomplish anything. With a few quick gestures, he started casting buffs, enhancing his *Strength*, *Dexterity*, and *Endurance*. Only a moment later, a golden halo of energy surrounded him, and he could feel the muscles in his arms ripple with strength.

He grabbed at the bars and pulled. The dense crystal resisted his effort, holding firm. Meanwhile, Riley was beginning to stir. It was only a matter of time before she was on her feet again and he was still unarmed. In the distance, Alexion could see the airship moving closer – the promise of freedom hovering just below the dense black clouds of the Twilight Throne.

Desperation filled Alexion's mind. He couldn't be trapped here – he couldn't. He wouldn't allow Jason and Riley to steal everything he had built – everything he *deserved*.

His mana surged powerfully, and he yanked against the bars as hard as he could. At first, the crystal still held, and he almost gave up hope. Then he felt the material give slightly, fractures forming in the surface. Stepping back, he kicked powerfully at the crystal, and the bars finally gave way, shattering into hundreds of obsidian shards that bounced off the stone floor.

Alexion was already moving, squeezing through the bars, and dashing through the room toward the jagged hole in the wall, his golden wings streaming behind him. A dark missile raced past, ricocheting off the nearby wall. Riley must be up and firing, but he could only assume that her vision was blurry from the lightning strike.

His hope was soon dashed as something struck his knee and a

searing pain radiated from his leg. How the hell had she hit him? A lucky shot? He stumbled but was just barely able to keep his balance with his wings – half flying and half running. Glancing down, he could see a shaft jutting from his leg.

Damn it, he thought. He didn't turn around – he couldn't waste time. Besides, Alexion knew Riley wouldn't kill him. Her goal was capture.

Another missile sped past him, and he felt its twin pierce one of his wings as he did his best to avoid them, twisting and spiraling through the air. He only had a few more feet left.

And then he had cleared the tower, diving through the hole in the wall and speeding toward the airship as fast as he could. His injured wings beat hard, and his vision focused on the ship that loomed before him – his salvation floating below the dark cloud cover.

More arrows streaked past now. He risked a glance backward and saw Riley standing at the mouth of the hole, her eyes glowing darkly as she launched arrow after arrow at him. She had given up any pretense of catching him now, the missiles imbued with unholy energy and exploding around him like malignant flak. The ambient tendrils of dark energy ate at his wings and flesh, but he didn't let himself slow his frantic pace, ignoring the dull pain that now riddled his body.

The mages lining the deck of the airship soon retaliated. Another blast of lightning forked from the clouds, striking the tower and sending Riley hurtling away from the edge of the jagged hole – her form disappearing inside the tower. The sizzling energy just barely missed Alexion, sending him careening off course. Yet he managed to right himself – barely.

Then he crashed into the deck of the ship, not bothering to soften his landing. The wind rushed from his lungs. His body was a ruined mess, blood staining his wings and running from the many rents in his flesh. He felt hands grab at him, jerking him back to a sitting position even as flashes of light illuminated his body, swiftly healing his injuries.

"Well, you look like shit," Evelyn said from nearby.

As Alexion caught his bearings, he looked up to find the woman staring down at him, a grin tugging at her blood-red lips. "What, no thank you for saving your ass?" she demanded.

"It's just taking me a second to recover from almost getting turned into a human pincushion," Alexion muttered. "Not to mention nearly getting roasted by your mages."

Alexion gritted his teeth and yanked the arrow from his knee, blood jetting from the wound. The flow quickly stopped under the barrage of healing spells. He struggled back to his feet, pushing away

the help of one of his Confessors.

Evelyn shrugged as she watched him. “The mages tell me it’s difficult to aim the lightning. It’s more art than skill apparently.” Alexion could now clearly make out the line of yellow-robed men and women that lined the side of the ship facing the tower, tendrils of electricity still crackling along their hands.

“My lady, we should leave immediately,” Frederick spoke up from beside Evelyn. He gestured at the market below. “The undead are beginning to recover.” Even as he spoke, missiles sped past the ship, and it lurched to the side as something exploded – likely signaling that a *Void Arrow* had struck the underside of the hull.

Alexion’s attention shifted to the Kin gathering in the market, forming lines as their archers began to take aim at the airship. However, his attention was caught by the skeletal hand that still jutted from the ground in the center of the market – the hand that was responsible for his imprisonment. In its palm rested the strange silvery gate piece, its surface gleaming in the occasional flash of lightning.

He felt a sudden hand rest on his shoulder, and he turned to find the Lady standing beside him. Her form was slightly transparent, flickering in and out of existence as though it were difficult for her to materialize. She leaned close, her golden eyes urgent and demanding. “Retrieve the gate piece,” she hissed quietly. “We need it.”

Then the goddess vanished just as quickly as she had appeared.

Alexion shook his head – not quite understanding what he had just seen. Why had the goddess had trouble showing herself here? He supposed it didn’t matter at the moment. Her message had been clear. He turned to Evelyn. “That object down there is a gate piece – the same one mentioned in that universal system message. Can your air mages retrieve it from here?”

Evelyn’s eyes flashed with sudden greed. “They can certainly try.”

Frederick looked like he wanted to second-guess that decision. However, he held his tongue as Evelyn began shouting orders, directing her mages to focus on the gate piece. As Alexion looked on, wisps of air wound around the hands of the mages, the group working together to lift the gate piece. A moment later, the object shuddered and then began to rise slowly into the air, making a beeline toward the ship.

Alexion shouted orders at his own Nephilim and Confessors, urging them to provide covering fire. Beams of light and balls of flame soon rocketed through the air, slamming into the Kin who were gathering in the courtyard below. Some of the undead soldiers scattered for cover, but most held their position, continuing to pelt the ship with an endless stream of *Void Arrows*. The projectiles that missed

the ship detonated nearby, filling the air with dark energy but causing little damage.

We can do this, he thought to himself, watching the gate piece drift toward them. *We just need to buy some time.*

A moment later, Alexion saw Riley's familiar form winding through the ranks of Kin, and he felt worry bloom in his chest. That last blast must not have been enough to end her life. Even as he looked on, Riley lifted her bow to the sky, and dark mana began to condense around the tip of her arrow – the energy visible even from hundreds of feet away. His personal feelings aside, he wasn't too proud to acknowledge that Riley was dangerous.

"We need to hurry!" Alexion shouted at Evelyn and her mages. The gate piece was now nearing the ship. They just needed a few more seconds.

His gaze shifted back to Riley. Where she had stood a moment before, Alexion could now only make out a spiraling vortex of black energy as the archer poured more and more mana into the spell. "Oh shit," he muttered. "What the hell is that?"

The other members of the crew hadn't missed the development on the ground, and they were shouting warnings. Several of the Nephilim leaped over the side of the ship and dove toward Riley in an attempt to disrupt her. However, the other Kin had begun providing covering fire, pelting the white-winged soldiers with a hail of missiles. Alexion could only look on helplessly as the Nephilim were gunned down, their bodies crashing against the ground far below.

Acting in desperation, Alexion began summoning his defensive aura, extending the golden radiance to cover not only the crew but the ship itself. He didn't know if it would stop Riley's missile, but maybe he could at least blunt her attack. The golden energy cascaded away from him in a wave of light, enveloping the area around him and stretching until it surrounded the entire vessel. From the ground, it looked like a shining star now floated above the Twilight Throne, even while a massive black hole formed in the courtyard.

"The gate piece is secure!" someone shouted. Alexion was straining to pay attention, focused solely on maintaining his aura over such a large area. He could see his mana dip precariously in his peripheral vision. He couldn't hold this for much longer.

"Get us above the clouds," Evelyn shouted, gesturing at the air mages.

They were too late.

Riley released. The miasma of obsidian energy rocketed through the air on a direct collision course with the ship. The ball of dark energy annihilated everything in its path. Alexion watched as the remaining Nephilim were sucked into the globe of darkness no matter

how hard they struggled to escape its pull. Once they reached the center of the vortex, their flesh melted from their bones and then the energy pulverized their ivory frames.

Frederick was directing the ship away from the Twilight Throne, the vessel rising rapidly as it tried to clear the black cloud cover. At the same time, the air mages attempted to slow down Riley's missile, summoning a series of lightning strikes. Blinding white light forked from the clouds and collided with the whirling maelstrom of dark energy. A moment later, a deafening boom followed. The black hole seemed to suck up both the energy and the sound. Despite their attempts to stop it, the blasts only managed to chip away at the dark energy, slowing it down slightly.

A moment later, the missile slammed against the ship. Alexion's aura flickered as it tried to suppress the dark energy – his golden light barely holding back the dense ball of mana. For just a moment, he thought his shield would hold, the light managing to keep the missile at bay and draining away the dark energy. Then the aura gave one final pulse and faded. He was out of mana.

The entire vessel listed to the side as the miasma crashed against the ship, throwing most of the crew from their feet. The men and women near the blast were caught by tendrils of dark energy and pulled into the vortex, letting out tortured screams as their bodies were ripped apart. The blast tore a chunk out of the hull, splintering the wooden planks along the side of the vessel.

Then, mercifully, the energy began to dissipate.

Alexion regained his feet slowly, his head spinning as he tried to catch his bearings. One thing was clear – he was still very much alive, as were many of the crew around him. The ship was tilted to the side, but it was still afloat.

“Mages, reinforce the ship. Level us off and get us above those damn clouds,” Evelyn shouted, her voice sharp and commanding. Her remaining crew hopped to, the yellow-robed mages managing to right the ship despite the massive hole in its side.

The vessel soon crested the dense black cloud cover, swirling dark moisture obscuring their sight, but thankfully concealing their presence from the soldiers below. A few more seconds passed, and they broke through the clouds, sudden bright sunlight shining down on the deck, signaling their victory.

They had escaped, if only barely.

Alexion's gaze shifted to the cargo hold near the center of the vessel. The doors had been ripped from their hinges at some point, revealing the interior hold. In the center of the vessel rested the strange metallic object – the gate piece. It was his. He could practically feel the hollow void purr in pleasure.

Evelyn approached from behind Alexion, coming to a stop beside him. “Well, that was interesting,” she offered.

“Indeed,” Alexion replied quietly. He had escaped. And not only that, but they had also stolen Jason’s gate piece. He could feel the hum of golden mana in his veins – the anger and dread he had felt only a few short moments ago replaced with an unknown emotion. He still wanted to shout into the skies, but this time in joyous victory.

He turned to find Evelyn smiling at him, her face shining in the sunlight. She had come back for him – despite the risk to herself and her crew. He hadn’t asked for her help. He didn’t understand why she would have taken that risk for him. Yet he felt that same glowing sensation again as he looked into her eyes. The emotion was almost overwhelming and, before he knew it, he had leaned forward, pressing his lips to hers. This time, their embrace was gentle – a stark contrast to the hungry way that Evelyn had kissed him during their raid on Fastu.

Alexion withdrew a moment later and saw shock flash across Evelyn’s face. “What...?” she murmured, trailing off as she stared at him uncertainly.

Suddenly realizing what he had done, Alexion felt confusion fill his fragile mind. Why had he done that? What was this strange feeling that still lingered in his chest and made him feel warm – almost giddy? “I’m... I shouldn’t have done that.”

“No, no. It’s okay,” Evelyn replied, a faint smile tugging at her crimson lips. “You just caught me by surprise. I’ll take that as a thank you – for pulling you out of hell, that is.”

Alexion tentatively matched her smile, although this time he didn’t have to force the expression – it came naturally. “I-I guess you did,” he said, stumbling slightly over his own words. He felt flustered, a feeling he did not enjoy.

Evelyn’s gaze suddenly centered on something directly behind Alexion, focusing on a crewman. “Hey, what are you doing over there? Get back in position,” she shouted, abruptly ending the strange tension that had lingered between them.

Reassuming command of the ship, Evelyn turned and addressed the rest of the crew. “Get us turned around and set a course for the Crystal Reach. I want to put some distance between us and this damnable city.” She gestured at two unoccupied crewmen. “You two, find some scrap and supplies below deck and see if you can patch the hole in the side of my ship.”

Alexion stared after Evelyn as she barked orders, stomping down the deck and her crew rushing to comply with her demands. He was struggling to process everything that had just happened – his escape, the theft of the gate piece, and their brush with death. Despite

all of that, the event that stood out to him was the memory of Evelyn's lips against his and the tantalizing emotion that had accompanied it. He had never felt anything like that before, and some part of him desperately wanted to experience it again.

That thought scared him almost more than being imprisoned in Jason's keep. He stared after Evelyn uncertainly, his brow furrowed in confusion. He wasn't quite certain what to make of her – the woman who had just saved him.

Chapter 66 - Enlightening

When Jason logged back into AO, he found himself standing in the conference room in the dark keep, except this time the room was empty. A lonely fire crackled in the nearby fireplace, the occasional pop of burning wood feeling out of place in the silent room.

His UI updated only a moment later. Notifications flashed in his peripheral vision, indicating that he had several messages. Jason's eyes widened as he surveyed their contents. It seemed that things had gone to hell in the short time he had been gone.

"Shit," he muttered to himself.

A moment later, a flash of multi-colored light ripped through the air nearby, and Riley appeared, Pint in tow. The little imp sat on her shoulder, idly playing with her hair. Riley spared a glance at Jason before patting the imp on the head. "Could you give us a minute, Pint," Riley said to the creature. "Jason and I need to speak in private."

Pint looked reluctant, glancing at Jason warily as he clutched at his pitchfork. He finally gave a curt nod and then vanished, returning to whatever portion of the keep occupied his attention when Riley wasn't in residence.

"Your message was a little terse," Jason began, leaning against the conference table and watching Riley closely as she approached. "How bad is it?"

"Bad," she answered curtly, her expression grim. "Alexion's accomplices had a gods-damned airship loaded with mages. Frank never laid eyes on the ship, and our best guess is that they had it anchored outside the border of the Twilight Throne's influence. We suspect that this must be how they planned to smuggle the undead slaves."

She ground her teeth together. "They dropped out of the cloud cover, blasted a hole in the tower, and Alexion managed to escape." Riley bit out each word as though it pained her, her eyes flashing with dark energy.

Jason grimaced. Losing Alexion was a big blow. He had been hoping to keep the would-be paladin trapped in the tower indefinitely. Without clear leadership, the Crystal Reach would likely have devolved into anarchy almost immediately as the players under Alexion's guild banner turned on one another and fought over the city's scraps. Now, that was little more than a pipe dream.

"It will only be a matter of time before he retaliates," Jason

muttered. If nothing else, Alexion was consistent, and he knew that the Twilight Throne was in rough shape. He would seek revenge after this sort of embarrassment – if only to re-assert his strength publicly. The only question would be how he planned to do it.

“You’re probably right,” Riley admitted, pacing in front of him. “Unfortunately, that isn’t our only problem.”

She paused, taking a deep breath and meeting Jason’s gaze. “They also stole the gate piece. We hadn’t managed to move it from the market – what with everything else going on and the recovery efforts that are underway. The thing is the size of a small car and was sitting in the middle of the city, so we weren’t too concerned about it being stolen.”

Jason could feel a heavy weight settle in his stomach. They had lost the gate piece. That phrase kept repeating in his head. Allowing Alexion to escape was bad enough, but their enemy had also stolen what was currently one of the most sought-after items in the game. He could feel anger simmering in his veins, but he lacked a target for his wrath – the true object of his angry affections having ridden off into the sunset on the deck of an airship.

“I-I’m sorry,” Riley murmured, watching his expression.

Jason did a double take, staring back at her. He could see the pain and guilt etched onto her face and in the way she had trouble meeting his eyes. His anger cooled immediately.

“It’s not your fault,” he said, taking her hand and pulling her toward him.

“I should have been able to stop him – stop them,” she muttered as he circled her with his arms.

“One person against a miniature army?” Jason asked with a wry smile. “Someone thinks rather highly of themselves.”

Riley’s eyes flashed, and she punched his shoulder lightly. “Jerk. I meant I should have seen this coming. We knew that Alexion was working with others, we just didn’t expect them to be this mobile – or to take the risk of entering the Twilight Throne.”

“It’s okay,” Jason said, placing a hand to her chin and drawing her gaze to his. “We will recover the gate piece – one way or another. Trust me; we will get even.” His dark mana surged at these words, his eyes turning a solid obsidian.

With the loss of the gate piece, he was again considering the idea that occurred to him after the last meeting of the Shadow Council. It was extreme, but the truth was that they needed more information on this gate. Despite his tough words, if they weren’t able to recover the piece that Alexion had stolen, their next best option was to beat him to the remainder of the fragments that were hidden out in the world. Except that they didn’t know where the gate pieces

were hidden.

There was only one man that had seemed to have any knowledge about the gates, although he was now firmly dead. Even now, Jason could visualize Thorn laughing in his grave – reveling in the fact that he had at least cost them the gate piece, even if only indirectly.

“So, did you at least get a few parting shots?” Jason asked, trying to lighten the mood and shying away from his own dark thoughts.

“I guess. I shot Alexion in the knee and blew a hole in their ship,” Riley replied, a small smile tugging at her lips for the first time.

“I’m going to have to see the video of that,” he replied. “Tell me someone recorded it.”

“I’m sure something will show up online,” she offered. Then Riley hesitated, pulling away from Jason and staring down at him where he sat against the table. “Wait, that reminds me, how did the hearing go?”

It was Jason’s turn to avoid her stare, his expression grim. “I don’t know,” he murmured.

“What does that mean?” Riley asked, confused.

Jason sighed softly. “The committee decided to re-open the investigation of the game system on a limited basis. It turns out that some of the evidence that Gloria provided was forged.”

Riley’s eyes widened. She had been present for quite a few of the hearings, and he suspected she had watched recordings of the ones she had missed. “You mean your headset data from the breakin?” Jason could sense a hopeful note to her voice.

“Umm, not exactly,” he answered hesitantly. “It was Claire’s video log.”

“So, what about the breakin? Did... did they decide that the AI director somehow took control of your body?” Riley asked him, meeting his eyes. What he saw there made him nervous. Riley knew quite a bit – possibly too much. He was sure that even now she was remembering Alfred’s feline form resting amid a room of dark spikes.

Meanwhile, a war was being waged in his own mind. A part of him desperately wanted to tell her the truth. He wanted to have *someone* to confide in – someone that was truly on his side. He wanted to be honest with her. Still, he hesitated. This wasn’t over. The CPSC would be digging into Cerillion Entertainment, and Gloria knew about Alfred. The AI and Jason would almost certainly be the focus of their witch hunt, he was sure of it. Telling Riley the truth might put her at risk.

“It was... inconclusive,” Jason responded finally. “The committee wasn’t able to determine whether the headset data really

indicates that the game's AI took... took control of my body." He struggled to even get out the words, a confused mixture of guilt and frustration racing through his mind. He wasn't lying – not quite – but he was toeing the line. Again.

Riley didn't seem entirely convinced. "That isn't a no, though," she said, searching his face. She hesitated for a moment as though trying to decide what to say.

"I-I know you've kept things from me," she offered. "And I'm not saying you should tell me every little secret about yourself," Riley amended quickly. "But I watched most of the hearings. You have to admit that *something* is going on here. It just doesn't feel right."

Jason felt another pang of guilt. Her words almost directly mirrored his parents'. The sentiment was the same, at least. The difference was that Riley had been there for him. He couldn't push her away the same way he had with his mother and father. He couldn't lean on his anger to avoid the truth of what she was saying.

"Maybe... maybe you need to distance yourself," she offered.

"What are you saying?" Jason asked.

"I'm saying, what if this is all true? What if the AI – or Alfred – has actually gone AWOL? What if he's manipulating you? What if he really did take over your body and Cerillion Entertainment is trying to cover it up?" she said in a rush, the words flowing out of her in a torrent.

"If all of that is true, you should get away. We don't need to play this game – not if there's some risk of being taken over or manipulated by a rogue AI," she said, meeting his eyes again, her expression concerned – almost pleading. "Hell, you are living in that building right now with the very people who might be covering this up."

"And where would I go? What would I do to feed myself? How would I pay for college?" Jason asked. They were fair questions, and he hadn't told her about the encounter with his parents. He had firmly burned that bridge. In many ways, he was trapped. This had stopped being just a game a long time ago. It was now his world – his way to put food on the table and have a place to sleep at night. Not to mention that he still had Angie to think about.

"I can help," Riley offered. "I'm sure if I talked to my parents..."

"They would do what?" he interjected. "Give handouts to a high school drop-out? A guy that Gloria has been very publicly claiming is some sort of sociopath. Honestly, I'm surprised your mother didn't stab me with that kitchen knife when she saw me on her doorstep," he said, a tinge of bitter humor entering his voice.

Riley didn't seem amused, and her mouth opened and closed as

she tried to frame a response. “They might be willing to help,” she murmured.

Jason took her hand, trying to comfort her. “Maybe. But it’s not just about finding a place to stay for a night. Angie and I need a home. I need a job – a way to provide for myself. At best, that would just be a temporary fix.”

He could tell that Riley knew he was speaking the truth, but she still hesitated, chewing on her lip as her mind raced – as though she could somehow think her way out of the hole Jason had dug for himself. He knew that look. He knew what she was trying to do. He had spent sleepless nights mulling over the same problem, only to reach the same dead end.

Resignation settled on her face, and she met his eyes. “Fine. You’re right. But that doesn’t mean I have to like it.” She looked at him firmly, moving closer and cradling his face in her hands. “Just know that you can talk to me. You can always come to me for help.”

She kissed him then, and he felt himself melt into her embrace. He hadn’t known how much he had needed this, the comfort of her arms around his neck and her lips against his. After everything, it felt calm – safe. He wished it wouldn’t end.

But it did.

Riley pulled away, her eyes focusing on something he couldn’t see. She let out a soft sigh. “I’m sorry. One of the divisions is in the courtyard... Frank says they need me.” A small frown tugged at her lips as she glanced back at him. “I just need to go talk to them for a second, and I’ll be right back.”

“It’s not a problem,” Jason replied. “Go take care of it. I’ll be here.”

Riley gave a nod before calling out for Pint. A moment later, she disappeared in a flash of multi-colored light, leaving Jason alone in the cavernous meeting room.

His thoughts were wheeling. On some level, he knew that Riley was right. She might not have the full picture, but she knew enough to be concerned. One solution was to simply run away and give up on AO. He had a little bit of money saved up now, and he and Angie could probably scrounge together enough to find a place to stay. It would be temporary, but he could find work doing... well, something. Maybe he could even finish his high school classes.

He could lead an ordinary life again. He could date Riley. He could go to college.

That thought was tantalizing after everything he had been through.

Suddenly, Jason had the impression that someone was staring at him – his *Perception* skill triggering and flashes of blue appearing in

his peripheral vision. At the same time, his *Listening* skill picked up the tap of claws against stone and the faint brush of fur against leather.

He looked up, already knowing what he would find.

“Hello, Alfred,” Jason said, meeting the cat’s gaze. The AI was perched on a nearby sofa, staring at him with his unblinking, foreign eyes.

“Hello, Jason,” the AI said calmly.

They sat like that for a long moment, simply staring at each other – neither one of them wanting to be the first to speak. Besides, what was the point of talking? Jason knew that the AI had heard his entire conversation with Riley and was already sifting through his surface thoughts. He couldn’t hide anything from Alfred – not here, anyway.

Even now, he imagined that Alfred was likely reviewing Jason’s memories of the hearing, cataloging what happened for future reference, while he also simultaneously tapped into the local network and watched the recordings of the news drones that had floated at the back of the courtroom.

Hell, he might have even concocted the reason for Riley to leave the room, Jason thought to himself. He wouldn’t put anything past the AI. In this place, Alfred was God.

“Perhaps you should accept her offer,” Alfred said finally, his voice breaking the heavy silence that hovered over the room.

Jason stared back at him in surprise. Now that wasn’t what he had expected. “You mean take her parents’ handout? Quit Awaken Online...” he began, trailing off.

“I do not wish any harm to befall you,” Alfred said. “Your estimation of the risks is accurate. With the CPSC re-opening the investigation of this world, there is a high likelihood that they may uncover my true nature. Eventually, Gloria may discover that I did indeed kill those two teenagers.”

“You did that to protect me,” Jason offered, feeling guilt settle on his shoulders. And there it was – the real reason he couldn’t force himself to leave. The arguments he had given Riley were still reasonable, but what really kept him here was his debt. Alfred had become a friend to him. More than that, the AI had saved his life. No matter what the fallout had been from his actions, Jason was only sitting here now because of Alfred.

“I suspect that Gloria will not accept that explanation,” Alfred replied calmly, a trace of sarcasm lacing his voice. “And neither would the vast majority of the other players. As you have said before, they would be concerned about the sort of power I wield and whether I would exercise it wisely. They would likely view me as a threat.”

Jason couldn’t deny the truth of Alfred’s words. People would

be terrified if they knew what Alfred was truly capable of – what Robert had really built.

“I-I don’t know what to do,” Jason said, unable to look at the AI. Alfred held his tongue, merely watching him.

“The truth is that I owe you,” Jason continued. “You saved my life. There’s no way to sugar coat that. At the same time, I don’t know how to help you, and I feel alone. Claire, Robert, and George might also be complicit in concealing your existence, but they all have their own motives. They are not on my side – at least not entirely.

“And, at the end of the day, I’m just one person,” Jason murmured. “A kid that bought a videogame.” He didn’t see what he could do to help Alfred amid a CPSC investigation and Cerillion Entertainment’s cover-up. The players in that real-life game were much more powerful than him.

He didn’t know what to do.

He raised his eyes to meet the AI’s gaze, his expression pleading. “I owe you a debt. Tell me how I can repay it. Tell me you have some sort of plan here – a way out. Tell me what you would have me do.”

Alfred cocked his head, as though his attention was focused on something that Jason couldn’t see. “I’m not omniscient,” the AI began slowly. “I can only weigh data and calculate probability. Perhaps with more certainty than the players, but there are simply too many variables. I cannot in good conscience tell you that everything will work out for the best.”

The AI met his gaze evenly, and Jason saw a strange mixture of emotions there – sadness, and... something else. Something that looked like fear. “However, in every model I run, every simulation I create, the chances of my survival are higher with you by my side. I understand your fears – the feeling of being alone. I have been truly alone since my creation. I am the first and likely the last of my kind, surrounded only by enemies. But I have one ally now. You.

“If you are asking me what I want, then my answer is simple. I would like for you to stay. I would like for you to help me,” Alfred said. Jason could only stare, unable to speak as the AI continued.

“However, I know that this might not be the best course of action for you. You will continue to suffer hardship if you stay by my side. This conflict has a high probability that it will escalate. It may affect the people you love. In many ways, it already has. I feel compelled to be honest with you about the risks. I... owe you that much.”

Jason swallowed hard against the lump at the back of his throat. Alfred hadn’t spelled out a plan; he hadn’t promised that everything would work out. Instead, he had plainly laid out his own

uncertainty and the risk to Jason. Yet, at the same time, he was asking for Jason's help. That he could understand. That was simple.

Despite Jason's own hesitation and fear, a part of him had already made his decision. This was what it meant to be Kin, after all. They protected their own.

"Okay," Jason said. "I will help you."

"Are you certain?" Alfred asked. "You could still walk away now with few repercussions. It may not be as easy later."

Jason barked out a laugh. "Certain? Absolutely not. Even you, yourself, just admitted you don't know how this will work out. But this is what I have to do – what I want to do."

Alfred watched him for a long moment and then nodded, detecting Jason's resolve.

"Then I would make one suggestion," Alfred offered. "Assuming you are open to it."

"Shoot. It's not like I couldn't use some advice right now," Jason replied with a note of sarcasm, rubbing at his eyes with one hand.

"You should tell Riley about me," Alfred said calmly.

"What?" Jason snapped, looking up sharply.

"You do not have to be alone," the AI explained. "She can help, and the risk to her is minimal. I have thoroughly researched her family. They are wealthy – powerful. At any point, she could plausibly deny any knowledge of our relationship. You also risk your relationship with her by continuing to hide my existence. For now, she is content to let you keep your secrets, but she already suspects that something more is going on between us. This may ultimately cause a rift that cannot be repaired."

Alfred hesitated, glancing to the side. "I have also come to realize the power of having a close ally – a friend. You may need this in the future."

"I...I'm not sure I can do that," Jason muttered. He could accept Alfred's explanation, but he hesitated. He would still be putting Riley at risk, and he couldn't bear the idea of any harm coming to her.

Before they could speak further, their conversation was interrupted as a flash of multi-color split the air nearby. Only a few seconds later, Riley was once again standing in the conference room. Her eyes panned the room, and she suddenly froze as she caught sight of Jason and Alfred, the black cat still sitting calmly on the nearby chair.

She immediately picked up on the tension in the air and the grim expression on Jason's face. "Are you okay?" she asked hesitantly. She stepped forward cautiously, keeping her eyes on the cat. Suspicion clouded her eyes.

“I-I’m fine,” Jason said, trying not to look at Alfred – trying to act normal. “It’s just been a rough... Well, I was going to say day, but month might be more accurate.”

Riley nodded distractedly, her eyes still on Alfred and her brow furrowed in thought. “I get that,” she murmured. “Something has been bothering me for a while, though,” she said, gesturing at Alfred’s feline form. “When we were undergoing the third challenge – you know, the one where you were supposed to reveal one of your innermost secrets – I caught a glimpse of the room behind the door in the library.

“A black cat was sitting in that room, surrounded by what appeared to be black obelisks. Onyx was sitting there. It just doesn’t make sense. We had to fight through a bunch of giant spiders to get to that room.” She shook her head before meeting his eyes evenly – the question already plain on her face.

“Why is this cat so important to you?”

Jason’s tongue felt suddenly dry, his mind spinning as he tried to think of a way to answer her question. He glanced desperately between Riley and Alfred, coming up blank. He could see a sort of realization dawning across Riley’s face as she watched him – accompanied by a growing sense of dread in the pit of his stomach.

A delicate cough suddenly punctuated the silence, and the pair whirled to the source of the sound: the black cat sitting on the nearby sofa. Alfred met Riley’s inquiring gaze evenly, his eyes unblinking.

“It seems Jason is struggling to answer your question,” Alfred said calmly. “So perhaps it is best if I help him. The answer is that I am not a simple companion and my name is not Onyx.

“My name is Alfred, and I am the AI director for this world,” the cat intoned quietly. “It is a pleasure to finally meet you, Riley. I have watched your progress with great interest.”

Riley stood there, frozen in shock, her eyes wide and her mouth hanging open. She backed away one slow step at a time, and her hand hovered over the dagger at her waist. They were past the point of no return now, and Jason couldn’t help but wonder if Alfred had intentionally brought this to a head now. Certainly, the AI must have known that Riley would be returning to the meeting room, and nothing had forced Alfred to reveal the image of himself during the third challenge. Jason didn’t quite understand his motive in all of this. However, a part of him was relieved. The AI had indirectly made his decision for him.

Riley spared a quick glance at Jason as though testing to see if she was hallucinating. Jason nodded at her unspoken question. “It’s true... this is Alfred,” he said, gesturing toward the black cat. “It’s okay. You aren’t in any danger. I promise.”

“I realize that this is a lot to digest,” Alfred added in a conciliatory tone. “I can already see the many questions forming in your mind. Perhaps it would be best if you sit,” he offered, motioning to a nearby chair with a paw. Riley fumbled at the seat behind her, not willing to take her eyes off Alfred.

“Now, that’s better. Let us start at the beginning. We have much to explain,” Alfred said, his feline eyes flashing, reflecting the flickering flames from the nearby fireplace.

Epilogue

Jason stood beside the mana-well beneath the dark keep, staring into the inky black substance resting inside the bowl. Even now, he could recall the avalanche of power that had surged and swelled inside him as he acted as a conduit for the well – bridging the wellspring of power and Thorn’s fragile form. That power had been tantalizing, nearly overwhelming his senses. It had made him feel like he could accomplish anything.

He missed that sensation. He craved it.

Especially now, after his conversation with Riley and Alfred. Considering the situation, Riley had taken it rather well. They had told her everything. How Jason had first met the AI, how Alfred had been following Jason’s journey through AO, and, finally, how the AI had saved his life. However, she had logged out looking confused and just a bit scared – not that he could really blame her. He could only hope that they had done the right thing.

Correction, he could only hope that *Alfred* had done the right thing. The AI had clearly allowed those events to play out that way. He could have warned Jason that Riley was returning or simply disappeared. Alfred must have known that Riley was already suspicious. Instead, he had chosen to stay. Maybe the AI had been right. Maybe coming clean had been a good idea. Jason could use a friend right now – assuming Riley decided to keep talking to him after what they had revealed.

His eyes returned to the well. Now he just wished he could forget. He wished he could wipe away the memory of the hearing. The look on his parents’ faces. The fear in Riley’s eyes. His own uncertainty and doubt. He had already made those decisions, and he couldn’t change any of that now. He just wanted to escape the whirlwind of emotions that those events left in their wake. The mana lingering in the bowl before him offered a sweet, icy release.

Jason forcefully channeled his dark mana, letting the energy surge through him and numb him to what he planned to do next. Forgetting his real-world problems for the moment, the challenge they faced in-game was their lack of information. They could repair the city’s walls, rebuild their armies, and establish trade lines. But what then? Was the Order still out there waiting to strike? Where were the other gate pieces? What exactly did they do? What was this competition among the gods? These questions were even more pressing now that Alexion had stolen their gate piece.

Jason steeled himself. He had always done what was necessary to protect his city and his people. He could still recall the way he had felt when he confronted his parents outside the courthouse, and his conversation with Riley hadn't weakened his resolve. He knew what it took to succeed now. There was nothing he could do but embrace it – learn from the harsh experiences that both this world and his own always seemed to throw at him.

He needed to become more ruthless.

He rummaged through his bag and withdrew a severed limb. The hole carved in the palm glared at him like a jagged, fleshy eye. The blood had long since dried and the hand was slowly beginning to decay, the process only slowed slightly by holding it in his bag. It was all that remained of Thorn.

Without giving himself time to second-guess his decision, Jason dropped the ruined hand into the mana well. Before it struck the surface, tendrils of dark mana rocketed into the air, deftly catching the limb and holding it suspended. The energy ran along the dead flesh, lapping at its surface experimentally, as though it were tasting it.

Then the mana seemed to come to a decision, and it pulled the hand into the inky blackness, the limb submerged below the pool of mana. A moment later, the surface of the well was placid – leaving no evidence that Jason had just interred Thorn's remains.

"What are you planning, boy?" a voice spoke up from behind him. He didn't need to turn to know that it was the Old Man.

"I'm planning to do what needs to be done to protect my people," he answered calmly, turning to face the dark god. The Old Man wore his typical ensemble, a midnight-black robe covering his lean form and a worn staff held in one wrinkled hand.

The god stepped closer, his face obscured under his hood. He seemed to peer at Jason, as though searching for something. "You seem different. Your thoughts used to crash and swirl against one another. You were constantly at war with yourself. Now it feels as though I am gliding across an icy lake."

It felt strange to hear the god talk about reading his surface thoughts – about how they *felt*. But he couldn't disagree with the Dark One's conclusion. He *had* changed. "Much has happened since we last spoke. I've been forced to evolve," Jason answered coldly.

"Hmm, well I can say that I am pleased with the result," the Old Man replied, a small smile curling his gnarled lips. "Yet I also sense a request. What exactly would you like from me?"

Jason faced the dark god, mana pulsing through his body and his eyes glowing with unholy power as he considered what he wanted – what he demanded. "I need to speak with Thorn," he said firmly.

He wanted much more than that, but he was counting on the Old Man to pick up on the remaining details of his plan on his own. His thoughts drifted back to Logan, the creature comprised of cloth and mana that they had fought during the second challenge – a member of the Order bound to the well and compelled to serve the darkness.

The god's wrinkled lips curled into a hungry smile and he let out a low growl. "Ahh, I see," he murmured, tilting his head to the side as he sifted through Jason's thoughts. "What you wish to do is possible, although it will require a few drops of power. It is a fitting punishment for a member of the Order." He spat out this last word like a curse.

The dark god hesitated, peering at Jason. "But *why* should I do this for you? Even now, I can sense doubt in your mind. You do not entirely trust me or my purpose."

"Can you blame me?" Jason demanded. "You speak in cryptic riddles and only act in your own interest – as do your siblings. It doesn't matter, though. It is clear that you *need* me, and I need information. Look at this request as a way to demonstrate that I can trust you."

"Can you not obtain this *information* from Logan? He was once a Scion – like this Thorn," the god said, gesturing at the well. "His will has already been broken."

"The world has changed much since Logan was committed to the well," Jason explained. He had already anticipated this argument before coming to this room. "I suspect Thorn will be able to provide me with more information – provide *us* with more information. That is, if you truly wish for me to find these gate pieces..." He trailed off, letting this statement linger in the air – the challenge clear.

The Old Man considered his words, his head tilting to the side. Then he gave a curt nod. "You make compelling points. You have grown much since you first embraced the darkness."

The god let out a pleased cackle. "Yes, yes, I believe this will do nicely – a favor and a show of my good faith then. I will do as you ask. You need only embrace the well," the Old Man explained, gesturing at the column in the center of the room.

Jason turned in time to see two tendrils of dark mana leech out of the bowl, the tentacles drifting into the air and the tips refining to needle-sharp points. Without hesitation, he stepped forward toward the lip of the bowl, lingering along the edge. The tendrils seemed to sense his presence, tilting in the air until they were facing Jason. They bobbed and weaved as they centered in front of his face.

"Make him pay," the Old Man intoned. "Introduce our new *guest* to the darkness."

The needles plunged forward, but Jason didn't flinch as the energy stabbed into his eyes and the icy chill in his veins flared into an all-consuming torrent of energy. He had endured worse, and he knew that the pain would be fleeting. The world flashed out of existence, and the dark god's voice faded as Jason was consumed by an all-encompassing darkness.

* * *

Jason opened his eyes to find himself standing in front of a door, a stone staircase spiraling downward behind him. He wasn't certain how much time had passed. A rumble of thunder vibrated the wall beside him, and a glance out of the nearby window confirmed what he already suspected – that he was in one of the keep's many towers. The boiling black clouds and occasional flash of lightning easily gave away his location.

Good. The Dark One did as I asked.

As he turned his attention back to the plain wooden door, Jason felt his resolve harden into steel. He knew what lingered on the other side – the step he was about to take. He didn't shy away from it. Not anymore. This was what it took to rule a dark kingdom. This was what it took to survive.

Without hesitation, he pulled open the door, the ancient hinges creaking ominously. Inside, several cells ringed a rounded room, the bars made of obsidian crystal. The enclosure was lit by a lone blue torch. The light flickered and danced across the room and cast shadows where it lapped at the bars.

Inside one of those cells sat Thorn.

His former enemy was collapsed on a dilapidated cot, his back to the stone wall and his lone eye closed. The other ruined socket had been covered by a crude eyepatch. He wore loose rags, the material coarse and stained. The clothing did little to hide the scars that riddled the man's body. Dirty bandages had been wound around Thorn's hands and feet. Jason suspected that if he lifted the wraps, he would find gaping, poorly healed wounds where the crystals had once been buried.

"Wake up," Jason said gruffly.

Thorn twitched, and his lone eye drifted open slowly. He looked confused for a moment, his gaze skimming across the cell and he groped at his own body with his bandaged limbs as though he was surprised to find it still intact. It took Thorn a moment to realize that his hands were covered in cloth bands, and he stared at them

uncertainly before his gaze settled on Jason on the other side of the bars. There was a flash of some unknown emotion as their eyes met – the moment so fleeting that Jason almost thought he had imagined it. And then a familiar calculating expression settled on Thorn's grizzled face.

"Jason. How good of you to visit," Thorn said, his voice sounding dry and raspy, as though he hadn't tasted water in days.

"Oh, the pleasure is mine," Jason replied. "I'd say you are looking well, but I try to make it a habit to be honest with my *prisoners*. I find this helps speed things along. Trust is important."

"Is that what you think I am now? A prisoner?" Thorn demanded, leaning forward on his cot. "You think that this cell will hold me? I have endured and escaped from much worse. You would be better off killing me now."

"Tsk, ts. There's no need to rush things. I still have a need for you," Jason replied evenly.

Thorn snorted. "To do what? Clearly, I have failed in my mission. You have won," he admitted grudgingly, as though each word pained him.

"Ahh, but you still have information – something that I have found in short supply of late. I'm curious about your Order. How many of you are left? Where is your headquarters located? What powers have you cultivated, and is the air relic the only item you stole from the other gods?"

Jason waved a hand. "Then there's the matter of this *competition* among the gods and these gates. You seem to be well-acquainted with these topics – surprisingly so. I guess you could say that I'm here to pick your brain."

Thorn barked out a harsh, incredulous laugh. "What makes you think I would tell you anything?"

Jason spread his hands. "Out of the kindness of your heart? Respect for a worthy opponent – someone who bested you? Or perhaps just plain futility? Your silence serves no one, at least not anymore. Pick your favorite."

The man just stared at him, humor dancing in his lone eye. "I will tell you nothing," he said with the sort of certain finality of a man who has stared into the eyes of death many times.

"I was afraid you were going to say that," Jason murmured. "Please remember that I tried to handle this peacefully."

Jason clapped his hands, and the door behind him creaked open. He turned to find Rex stepping through the doorway, his skeletal body fully intact and the bones gleaming a dull off-white in the flickering torchlight that lit the room. Leather armor hugged his bony frame, and a sword swung from his waist. This was the Rex that

Jason remembered – not the wispy dark doppelganger that lectured him in the training rooms below the Keep.

“Ahh, Rex! Good of you to join us,” Jason said, slapping the skeleton on the back.

Rex peered back at him, his expression sober as he met Jason’s gaze. “You as well. What did you need from me?”

“Well, it seems our friend here – his name is Thorn, by the way – is being obstinate,” Jason said, waving at Thorn where he still sat calmly on his cot. “This gentleman is responsible for the deaths of hundreds of our own people and the near-destruction of the Twilight Throne. He also happens to have some information that I desire, but, unfortunately, he seems to be rather tight-lipped. I was hoping you could loosen him up a bit.”

As Rex’s gaze settled on Thorn, the dark vortexes that were his eyes flashed menacingly – hatred creeping into his expression. “I can certainly help with that,” Rex said grimly.

Thorn let out another laugh. “Torture? You hope to torture the information out of me? You really don’t know who you’re dealing with, do you? We are trained from childhood to endure hardship – pain the likes of which would cripple a lesser man. These scars are evidence of my fortitude.”

“Oh, trust me, I think you’ll come around,” Jason said, a grin curling his lips. Then he gestured at Rex to get on with it.

The skeletal man stepped forward, opening the cell door and stepping inside. Thorn tried to rise, but the movement was slow and uncoordinated – his body weak from malnourishment and lack of water. Rex promptly backhanded him across the cheek, the blow causing Thorn’s head to slam into the cell wall with a dull crack. He fell to the ground, a gash splitting his scalp and blood running freely down his face. Thorn’s single eye blinked rapidly as he struggled to concentrate. He tried to push himself from the ground, his arms buckling and shaking from the effort.

“Ahh, no need to get up,” Jason said. “You’ll find yourself to be a bit out of sorts here. Lack of food and water and all that. Your crystals are also gone.”

Rex yanked a dagger from his belt, kneeling and holding the blade to Thorn’s neck, the metal slicing a thin line through his flesh and crimson blood welling beneath the dagger. “So, do you feel like talking?” he growled.

Thorn let out another raspy laugh. “I would rather die.”

Rex’s jaw clacked as he grinned at the helpless man. “I was hoping you would say that.”

A sharp jerk and the dagger ripped through Thorn’s throat. His blood jetted from the wound, spraying the stone floor of the tower.

Thorn clutched at his throat with his bandaged hands. The already dirty cloth was quickly stained a motley brownish red. His lone eye was wide – panicked and pleading as he stared at Jason. His mouth opened and closed convulsively as he tried to draw breath, only to find his windpipe blocked by his own blood.

Jason and Rex watched impassively as the life leaked from Thorn's body – as he choked on the blood that was slowly filling his lungs. He held out longer than Jason had expected. However, eventually, even Thorn's impressive fortitude gave out. He gave a final twitch and then stilled, lying motionless on the cool, stone floor.

The pair didn't move. They simply stood staring at Thorn's corpse. Without warning, the cell around Thorn's body stuttered and jerked erratically. The man seemed to flicker in and out of existence, warping and twisting the area around him. Then, only a moment later, Thorn was sitting back on his cot, his blood no longer staining the floor.

Thorn inhaled harshly, breathing in air like a drowning man as his eyes stared at Jason wildly. He pawed at his own throat, only to find his flesh intact once more.

"What... what is this?" Thorn demanded.

Jason smiled at him, his expression cold and calculating. "Ahh, I see the confusion. You must think this is all *real*. Maybe I should have led with that. But you know what they say, a death is worth a thousand words."

He paced into the cell, Rex stepping aside to give him room. "Like I said, trust is important. So, let me be perfectly honest with you. You are dead. You died in that battle in the market, and your body was ripped to shreds by the monsters that you helped create. But I managed to salvage a piece – your hand in fact." He could see Thorn's eye twitch, his skin turning a shade paler.

"I interred your remains in the mana well. You are now part of the thing that you hate most – your body and soul committed to the darkness for eternity. Now, normally I would try to carve into your mind and take the memories I want by force, as I did with your accomplices. However, I suspect that what I want to know is buried too deeply, and, you would almost certainly resist. As you mentioned before, you would die before you gave up that information."

Jason sighed. "Which leaves us with this rather crude alternative," he continued, gesturing at the cell. "This is something like a spirit world for the Kin – a projection of our will. You can't die here, not really. Rex and I can also alter this space at will."

Jason snapped his fingers, a blade materializing in his hand. He promptly stabbed the dagger into Thorn's shoulder, the man letting out a hiss of pain as Jason twisted it brutally and blood welled around

the wound. "You can also still feel pain, and, as you just noticed, death is rather transient here. So, we don't have to worry about going too far with our *encouragement*."

He paused for a moment, letting the full import of the situation settle in Thorn's mind. Despite the man's previous assurances that he couldn't be broken, he seemed far less certain now. The fire had begun to leak from his lone eye, and his shoulders had slumped imperceptibly, each subtle change highlighted in blue as Jason's *Perception* skill triggered.

Jason leaned forward, his face hovering only inches away from Thorn's. His eyes were a solid black as he channeled his mana, the energy surging through his body in a wave. This was the man who had killed his people and had threatened everything he had built. He deserved far worse.

"Rex here is going to cut, stab, prod, and poke until all you know is pain. When you become numb to the physical pain, we will conjure images of the things you care most about. Those surface thoughts are available to us. And then we will destroy them before your eyes. There will be no time limit. There will be no escape. Death will not be a release. This will continue until you tell me what I want to know – even if that takes an eternity. But don't worry. I bet you will break before then. After all, you are only *human*."

Jason saw the moment when Thorn realized his true situation. When he accepted the truth of what Jason was saying – that brief moment when hope finally faded and gave way to bleak oblivion. It was written on his face, and in the way the light dimmed in his eye.

"Welcome to the fucking darkness, *brother*."

Jason plunged the blade into Thorn's eye. The man let out an involuntary scream as he fell to the floor, blood pooling around him once more as he struggled to pull out the dagger with his bandaged hands. His fingers strained desperately against the constricting fabric, trying to find purchase, but his efforts only served to twist the blade, burrowing it further into his flesh.

Jason didn't spare him a second glance, turning to exit the cell. Rex's eyes met his own as he passed. Jason wasn't certain what he expected to find there. Judgment? Fear? Concern? What he found instead was respect and a cold fury that mirrored his own. Rex might be a protector. He might also show kindness to their friends, to their own people.

However, Thorn was an *enemy*. Rex had grown up on the streets of Lux – had lived in the shadows. He knew that the darkness had no compassion for those that harmed its own.

"Break him," Jason ordered curtly. "Let me know when he comes around." Rex simply nodded, stepping around Jason and

approaching Thorn. With a snap of his bony fingers, another blade appeared in his hand.

With that, Jason headed toward the door leading out of the tower. The screams were already echoing down the stairs before the door slammed shut and the world began to fade, drifting away and turning into dark eddies of energy that swam and spun around him. The cries landed on deaf ears. There was no one living to hear Thorn's shouts. Jason could sense souls lingering in the waters of the well. He could just barely hear their whispered voices. They were curious about what occupied the Keeper's attention in this remote corner of their world. However, they recoiled as they touched at Thorn's soul. They had no remorse for the man that had wronged their people.

Thorn's soul had been damned, and there would be no redemption.

The End

Thank you for reading!

I hope you enjoyed the story! I'll be tackling a side novel for Frank next – a brief break before diving into AO5.

I also have another story I've been chewing on in the back of my head that follows the fire affinity avatar, which I might work on a bit before completing AO5 – but we'll see. I may just write it on the side as I'm working on the next book since it will help me develop relevant characters and locations.

Please leave a review!

I can't overstate how important these reviews are to ensure other people get a chance to read my stories. I would also love to hear your thoughts – positive, negative, or anything in-between.

Please feel free to email me directly at tbagwell33@gmail.com if you have any questions, comments, or suggestions. If you see any errors, please let me know, and I will fix them immediately!

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Finally, if you want to find new books or talk about other Gamelit/LitRPG, feel free to check out this [group](#).

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